SEPT.
15¢
Ace-High
WESTERN
STO
SEPT. 1947
Ace-High WESTERN STORIES
15¢
JUBILEE VALLEY'S QUICK DEATH COMBINE
HARD-HITTING NORTHWEST NOVEL
by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER
COLT-FEVER QUARANTINE
by WALKER A. TOMPKINS
ROAN · COLT ROBBINS AND OTHERS

Next to the Diamond...nature's most brilliant Gem!

GENUINE

ZIRCONS

IN 14Kt. GOLD

Here are Zircons that rival the brilliance of the Diamond. Big, impressive Zircons in rich Blue or brilliant White color set in lavish mountings of 14K yellow Gold. Wear a Zircon Ring and see how your friends admire it.

SEND ONLY $1

WE WILL SEND YOUR ZIRCON RING FOR APPROVAL UNDER OUR MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

Simply indicate your selection on the coupon below and forward it with $1 and a brief note giving your age, occupation, and a few other facts about yourself. We will open an account for you and send your selection to you subject to your examination. If completely satisfied, pay the Expressman the required Down Payment and the balance in easy payments of $5 a month. Otherwise, return your selection and your $1 will be refunded.

F290/E745 **42.50**
Bridal Combination. 1½ Carat Zircon Engagement Ring with 2 side Zircons; matching 5 Zircon Wedding Band. In 14K yellow gold. **Send $1, pay 3.25 after examination, $5 a month.**

F166 **15.95**
Ladies 1 Carat Zircon in 14K yellow Gold. **Send $1, pay $1 after examination, $5 a month.**

G220 **24.75**
Man's 1 Carat Zircon in 14K yellow Gold. **Send $1, pay 1.50 after examination, $5 a month.**

F246 **24.75**
Impressive 2 Carat Zircon for Her. In 14K yellow Gold. **Send $1, pay 1.50 after examination, $5 a month.**

G716 **42.50**
Massive Zircon Ring for Him. Total Weight, 2 Carats. 14K yellow Gold. **Send $1, pay 3.25 after examination, $5 a month.**

Prices Include Federal Tax

SEND $1 WITH COUPON — PAY BALANCE OF DOWN PAYMENT AFTER EXAMINATION

L. W. Sweet, 25 West 14th St. (Dept. P6)
New York, N. Y.

Enclosed find $1 deposit. Send me No..... Price $..... After examination, I agree to pay $..... and $5 monthly thereafter until full price is paid, otherwise I'll return selection and you will refund my dollar.

I prefer ☐ Blue Zircons ☐ White Zircons

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY..... STATE.....

L. W. Sweet

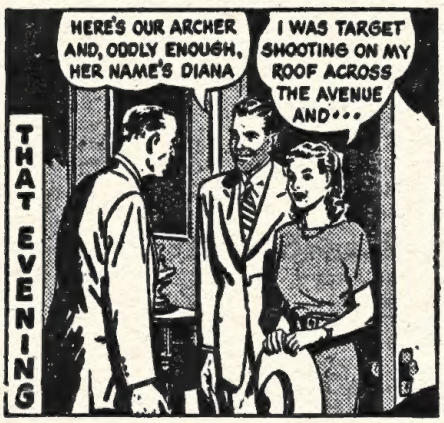
MAIL ORDER DIVISION FINLAY STRAUS, INC.
25 W. 14th St., NEW YORK 11, N. Y. Dept. P6

INSPECTOR MOON WON HIS BET AND THEN . . .

IN A LOFTY NEW YORK APARTMENT, DETECTIVE INSPECTOR JIM MOON AND A MYSTERY WRITER, H.H. KYNE, ARGUE OVER THE PLAUSIBILITY OF THE LATTER'S NEWEST "WHO DONE IT" WHEN . . .

. . . AND SO, WHILE AUTHOR KYNE TRIES ARM-CHAIR DEDUCTION TO FIND THE MYSTERIOUS ARCHER, INSPECTOR MOON VISITS SPORTING GOODS STORES

THAT EVENING



JUST IMAGINE! ME THE MAIN CHARACTER IN A REAL MYSTERY!
YES, AND WITH A DASH OF ROMANCE, IT'LL MAKE A GOOD YARN
HE'S WONDERFUL LOOKING

THIN GILLETTES GIVE YOU SMOOTH, REFRESHING SHAVES THAT LOOK AS GOOD AS THEY FEEL. THAT'S BECAUSE THEY HAVE THE KEENEST, SMOOTHEST-FINISHED EDGES OF ANY LOW-PRICED BLADE ON THE MARKET. WHAT'S MORE THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY, THUS, YOU'RE PROTECTED FROM THE SMART AND IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN GILLETTE BLADES
4 10

THE BEST VARIETY IN ANY WESTERN MAGAZINE

THE COWBOY'S MAGAZINE

15¢

Ace-High Western Stories

Vol. XVI, No. 4 CONTENTS September, 1947

Four Smashing Western Novels!

COLT-FEVER QUARANTINE ..... **Walker A. Tompkins** 6
That Rebel cattleman, Cloyd Thornton, joined his bitterest enemies, the damnyankee, feudin' Stilsons, who turned Hell's Pocket inside out to carve themselves a smoky graveyard sanctuary.

JUBILEE VALLEY'S QUICK DEATH COMBINE ..... **W. D. Overholser** 36
A cattle-baron's prodigal son led a legion of greenhorn plowpushers onto his father's range—to sow their crop of corpses!

WHISKEYTOWN'S PISTOL PILGRIM ..... **Tom Roan** 72
Lucky Wingo, gun-wise pilgrim, rode into a bushwhackers' paradise and received a real Winchester welcome—served with blood-and-bullet sauce, red-hot from the Devil's frypan!

THE BOOM-CAMP MANBREAKERS ..... **D. B. Newton** 84
As a gold-rush samaritan, Shad Gurney assayed one hundred percent, when he nursed the dying tenderfoot. . . . Who could only repay him in deadly, Colt-minted coin.

Four Action-Packed Short Stories!

SAY IT WITH SIXGUNS! ..... **Marvin J. Jones** 27
The greenhorn frontier editor prepared to peddle his papers in Hell!

HARDLUCK JONES—HOODOO-BUSTER! ..... **Harrison Colt** 53
Hardluck Jones, desert rat, knew his string had run out when he gave away a fortune!

HELL-ON-THE-HIP! ..... **Gunnison Steele** 62
A pine box was waiting for that tanglefooted stranger when he grabbed iron against Ace Murdo!

MAN-KILLER! ..... **John C. Ropke** 65
The four-footed death in that black killer-stallion damned Owen Lukon forever.

Dramatic Frontier Feature

SECOND-STRING HEROES ..... **Robbins and Waggener** 35
J. Howard Brown, tonsorialist to a president, went West in disgrace—to resume hair cutting and regain his honor!

All Stories New—No Reprints

NEXT ISSUE PUBLISHED AUGUST 27TH!

Published monthly by Fictioneers, Inc., a subsidiary of Popular Publications, Inc., at 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter November 29, 1945, at the Post Office at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1947, by Fictioneers, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 15c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, $1.80; other countries 50c additional. Send subscriptions to 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Any resemblance between any character, appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional. Printed in the U.S.A.

DRIFTING? TRY DRAFTING

You're too smart to stay in the same boat with the "drifters." Unlike them, you want to settle down on a steady course, work toward advancement, make your future secure. But before you chart your course, take a good look at drafting—its opportunities and its rewards. You'll find it one of the most promising fields open to you. You'll also find that the International Correspondence Schools can help you acquire the training you need. I. C. S. Courses in Mechanical and Architectural Drafting—and 400 other technical and business subjects—are practical, authoritative, easy to follow. The coupon below brings full information. Mail it *today!*

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

ICS

BOX 3275-Y, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course *before* which I have marked X:

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemistry Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Bridge and Building Foreman
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman

Steam Engineering Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Steam Electric ☐ Steam Engines

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Arithmetic ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship ☐ French
- ☐ Good English ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Illustrating ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Postal Service
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Spanish ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

Name _____ *Age* _____ *Home Address* _____

City _____ *State* _____ *Present Position* _____

Working Hours _____ *A.M. to* _____ *P.M.* **Length of Service in World War II** _____

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Enrollment under the G.I. Bill of Rights approved for War II Veterans.

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

• • COLT-FEVER

Hard-Hitting Texas Frontier Novel

CHAPTER ONE

Ruined Range

TUMBLING blue-black smoke boiled up from Horseshoe Basin in a geysering column which palled the sky over the *brasada* flats, and dulled the Texas sun into a tarnished copper rivet.

Since dawn, Cloyd Thornton had been steering toward the vertical pillar of smoke, homeward bound from San Antone with a fat beef contract in his pocket and a lift in his heart that felt good after the five lean years behind him.

Noting that the smoke apparently retreated before him as his grulla flung back the miles, Thornton guessed idly as to its

Thornton leaned forward and clubbed the lash in a blurring arc across Braze's forearm.

QUARANTINE • •

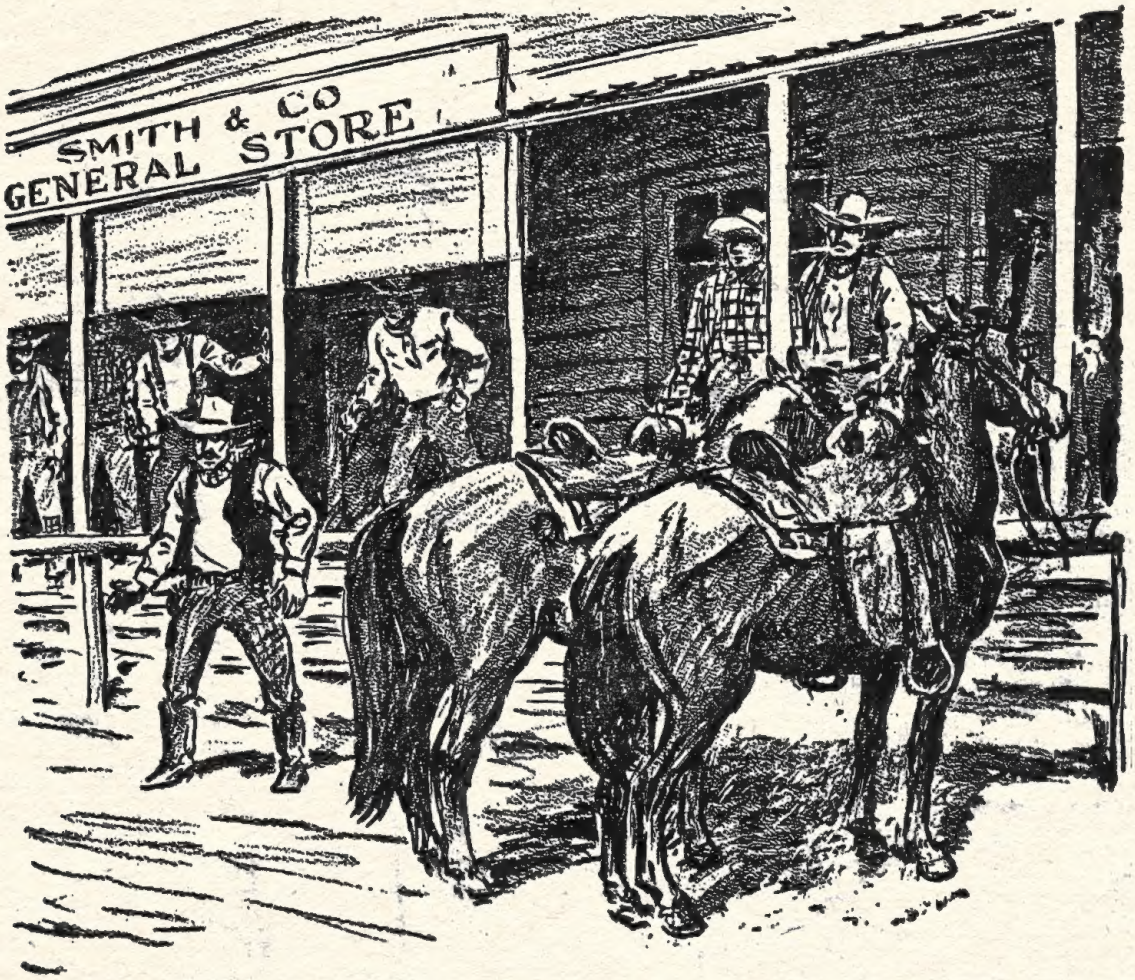
By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

source. The asphalt pits at Brea Hoya on the Rio Grande, fifty miles south, maybe. A heller of a fire, wherever it was . . .

But perspective is a tricky thing in a land of limitless vistas, and it came as a shock to Thornton, reaching the rimrock overlooking the Basin, to discover that the smoke stemmed from the heart of his own Box 36 range.

"Them damned Stilsons run a sandy on me—"

First instinct told the cowboy that his snake-blooded neighbors on the Turkey Track spread had fired his graze, knowing he was absent for a couple of weeks. But he was home four days ahead of schedule, thanks to putting his gray saddler aboard a cattle train running empty to El Paso.



Cloyd Thornton, unreconstructed Rebel, sided his bitterest enemies, the damnyankee, feudin' Stilsons, in a live-or-die battle to wrest enough of that disease-ridden, death-scourged range to carve out a smoky sanctuary against the raiding Back-Shoot Sodbuster Syndicate.

He had quit the train at Commanche Tanks, a whistle-stop due north of the Basin, at dawn this morning. Riding deadhead by rail had cut a hundred and eighty miles off his homeward trek, putting Thornton on the North Rim before the sun was high in the smoke-palled sky.

When the first shock of discovery had spent itself, Thornton revised his hunch so far as the hated Stilsons were concerned. Turkey Track would hardly run the risk of a general brush fire, which could just as easily destroy them if the wind shifted direction.

Besides, this smoke was too black, fuming too thickly to be fueled by mesquites and catclaw. The smudge had the look and odor of a burning tar barrel; a shift in the breeze brought the ungent smell of petroleum to Thornton's nostrils, needling his puzzlement.

The breeze also carried something to the cowman's ears. The bawling of bunched cattle beyond the hogback; the remote spate of gunfire, sharp reports which came from high-powered rifles. All hell must have broken loose over in the canyon this morning—

Thornton gave his grulla the hooks, pushing off the old Indian trace he had followed down from the railroad siding at Commanche Tanks.

Scaling the brushy ridge which formed the north shoulder of the Salina's *barranca,* Thornton pulled up the grulla for a moment's blow. Plenty had happened during the three weeks he had been away from the home spread.

Over to the northwest, where Alkali River sluiced its way out of the Big Bend uplands to meander down the middle of Horseshoe Basin, the rider could see the remote scar on the slopes above the Stilson ranch where crews of Mexican laborers were busy with fresno scrapers, throwing a dam across the Alkali, or rather laying the foundations for a coffer structure. That would be Ozée Cutler's Land Investment Syndicate's project, a lure for the army of sodbusters which had invaded the lower Basin this summer with a view to buying farm land.

Ordinarily, such a sharp reminder of the Syndicate's threat to land which had been unfenced cattle country since Spanish times would have goaded Thornton with anger.

But now, Cutler's proposed dam and the irrigation project which would follow it, was crowded out of the rider's mind.

Unbelieving, his eyes followed the ugly black smoke column to its base in a dry wash directly below where he sat his horse. This was no brush fire, but a controlled, man-made holocaust fed by crude oil from a black tank-wagon drawn by a team of mules, its big hose snaking over the cutbanks to fuel the roaring flames.

Mexican vaqueros had bunched a thousand-odd head of Thornton's prime Box 36 beefstuff into a clearing beyond the furnace pit in the arroyo, holding them there in the open. Off to one side, a line of men were strung out like a military firing squad, a dozen in number, and were shooting Winchesters at the helpless animals.

Each gunshot dropped a bawling Box 36 steer or cow or calf. Mexican brush hands were dragging the carcasses away from the edge of the herd between bursts of firing, using mules to dump the dead longhorns into the blazing inferno of oil-fed brush in the arroyo's pit.

It was wanton destruction of Texas beef too overwhelming for Cloyd Thornton's brain to grasp.

PRUDENCE would have told an ordinary man that it was suicidal to buck the odds that faced Thornton at the foot of the slope. In addition to the execution squad with their Winchesters, the Mexicans carried guns, as well as the muleskinners tending the tank wagon.

But Thornton was cut a different way of the leather. Recklessly ignoring the odds stacked up against him, he hauled a .30-30 carbine from his saddle boot and sent his grulla rocketing down the brushy slope, his one thought being to fight back at these *extranjeros* who were decimating his herd.

The line of riflemen ceased fire as Thornton hammered down to the level of the flats and sent a warning bullet winging through their ranks. They drew together in a bunch, leaving their rifles on the ground to signify their peaceful intentions.

"What in hell is this?" Thornton raged, whipsawing his mount to a skidding halt before the group. "Who give you orders to pull off this barbecue?"

Curiosity rather than hostility was stamped on the faces of the rifle crew as

they gestured toward a big horseman who sat a piebald mare fifty yards away in the shade of a scrub cottonwood.

"Don't rowel us, stranger—see Ford Brockway over yonder," spoke up a jumper-clad rifleman. "This is his deal, not ours."

Scowling, Thornton wheeled his horse around and galloped toward the lone hombre under the cottonwood. As he drew closer he saw the glint of a law badge flashing on the man's duck jumper and for the first time, he realized that something deeper than mere vandalism lay back of the mass slaughter of his beef.

Reining up, Thornton was surprised to see that this Ford Brockway was wearing a Cattle Association badge; a heavy-joweled man with the blue roots of a close-shaven jaw coloring his swarthy skin. He wore a stiff-brimmed El Stroud sombrero and a brace of Peacemaker .45's strapped around his paunch.

"You'll be Cloyd Thornton?" Brockway broke the heavy silence which lay between them. "Owner of this spread, eh?"

Thornton could only nod at the moment. A sense of disaster was pounding at his senses, a feeling that his world and hopes had been pulled out from under him during his visit to San Antone. He had expected to find Morf Stilson's hand back of this outrage, not a C.A. detective.

"I'm Inspector Brockway, sent down here by the State Range Commission," the lawman went on, unruffled by Thornton's glowering silence. "I tried to reach you by telegraph at the address you left at the ranch but I missed you, Thornton."

As he spoke, Brockway gestured toward the oil wagon, the bawling herd of Box 36 animals which Mexicans had popped out of the thickets and bunched here in the canyon of the Salina. The odor of cremating meat cloyed the air, striking nausea in the pit of Thornton's belly.

"What's the deal?" he asked heavily. "Make it good, damn you!"

Brockway's thick shoulders hitched around, his slanted eyes taking Thornton's measure as he saw the man's knuckles go white on the stock of his Winchester. Thornton was a big man, dangerous in his present berserk mood; a man whose six foot height and wiry bulk appeared deceptively foreshortened in saddle.

"I've slapped a quarantine on Horseshoe Basin, Thornton," the C.A. inspector explained. "Hoof and mouth outbreak. I got State authority to destroy every critter grazing on Box 36 land."

Brockway drew a condemnation order from the pocket of his brushpopper jumper as he spoke, but Thornton waved the document aside, a cold prescience of doom numbing his body.

"Hoof and mouth disease?" he echoed. "That can't be, man. Somebody's tryin' to run a sandy on me, freeze Box 36 into bankruptcy. I got a vet's certificate in my pocket to prove my range is clean of everything from screw-worm to anthrax—"

Brockway pocketed the quarantine order and gathered up his reins.

"Seein's believin', as the feller says," the Cattle Association official grunted. "Come along, Thornton. What we're doing here is hell on you, but it's got to be done for the sake of the range in general. You know what an epidemic could do—"

Cradling his .30-30 across the high-horned Brazos stock saddle, Thornton followed the range inspector across the flats toward the base of the soaring smoke column. He saw a wagoneer twist the valve on a hose line leading from the tank wagon, the jet of crude oil bringing a fresh burst of searing red flame from the pile of slain longhorns below the arroyo banks.

"Hold it, Pablo!" Brockway ordered a Mexican who was dragging a freshly-slain yearling bull toward the pyre behind a pair of mules. The stolid-faced *pelado* halted his team, staring inscrutably as Thornton swung out of stirrups and strode forward to inspect the slain animal.

One look at the yearling's scabrous, festering muzzle, at the wasting disease which had attacked its cloven hoofs, was all the Box 36 boss needed to know that his fight to keep the ranch out of the hands of the receivers was lost.

HOOF and mouth disease, the scourge of the range country, had forced Texas authorities to slap a quarantine on his range. No veterinary's skill could halt the spread of the cancerous infection. Only fire could stamp out its virulent progress through a herd—fire and bullets. There was no way of telling whether an entire herd was infected or not. So long as they

were exposed to the disease, Brockway's methods were obligatory . . .

"It's hell, young feller," Brockway sympathized gravely, as he saw Cloyd Thornton thrust his carbine back into scabbard and remount. "Catching it early this way, the graze won't be infected, I don't reckon. Next year you can restock your spread from scratch."

Thornton grunted harshly, turning his back on Ford Brockway and spurring away, past the silent ranks of the State riflemen.

These cattle being consigned to the fiery pit were the beef he had contracted to sell at top market prices with the commission men and the packeries. This season's beef gather would have wiped out the burden of indebtedness which his sire, old Alamo Thornton, had left Cloyd upon his death five years ago. Enough dinero to put Box 36 in the clear with the Stockman's Bank over in Sixprong town . . .

Without once looking back, Thornton pushed his grulla at a steady fox-trot down the *brasada* trail toward the home ranch he had left with such high hopes three weeks ago.

Behind him in Salina Canyon, the steady crash of gunfire resumed and the odor of burning carcasses pursued Thornton's nostrils long after he was out of sight of the grim scene of inevitable massacre . . .

HIS thoughts turned toward the big Turkey Track spread which shared the north half of the Basin with Box 36, wondering if the dread disease had struck the Stilson outfit as well as his own, or if Brockway's quick action would confine the epidemic to his land.

Not that he would give a damn if the Stilsons were wiped out too. Morf Stilson and his sister Julie and their big Yankee foreman, Lant Braze, were sworn foes of the Box 36. It was a feud that had its roots in a bygone generation, when Colonel Jerrod Stilson had been a scout under Custer and Sheridan and Alamo Thornton had been a brevet captain of cavalry under Jeb Stuart and his Lone Star Volunteers.

After the war, the Stilsons—bluenose carpetbaggers from Ohio, the whole damned clan of them—had grabbed the Turkey Track from its original Texas owners during the reconstruction period. It was inevitable that the old feud between Yank and Rebel should be carried into Horseshoe Basin, for Alamo Thornton was not the breed to admit that the Cause had been lost at Appomattox.

Through Cloyd's boyhood, the feud had raged intermittently. Jerrod and Alamo, patriarchs of the warring factions, had met over blazing Dragoons in the main street of Sixprong five years ago, in a quarrel over the placement of a barbed wire spite fence which divided the two ranches. Both of the old soldiers had died that day, were buried in the same boothill.

But the feud had not died with them. Jerrod's oldest son, Jesse, got himself likkered up after the funeral. He had lain in wait for the Thorntons on their way back to the Box 36, had put a slug into Alamo's oldest boy Dennis.

Dennis had died in his mother's arms, and Mrs. Thornton went to her grave shortly thereafter, dead of a broken heart, pleading with her surviving son Cloyd, then twenty-five, to halt the Stilson-Thornton feud before any more blood was shed.

To avenge Dennis' murder, Cloyd had invaded the Turkey Track bunkhouse and hauled Jesse Stilson at rope's end back to the custody of Sheriff Tom Radlock in Sixprong. In due time Texas law ran its course and Jesse Stilson died on the gallows, leaving his kid brother Morf and his sister Julie to carry on for the feuding Stilsons . . .

Five years ago, that had been. There had been no open flare-up in the Stilson-Thornton feud since that time. Morf and Julie were too busy keeping the Turkey Track going to waste time in bushwhackings.

The intervening years had been tough on Texas cattlemen. Drought had stunted their herds, burned the life out of their range, dried their waterholes two seasons running. Severe winters had further decimated their range, bringing both the Box 36 and the Turkey Track to the brink of ruin.

But the market had rallied last season and Cloyd Thornton, at least, believed he could keep his head above water with the proceeds of this year's gather.

Now hoof and mouth disease, striking with devastating suddenness, had come to spell finish for the Box 36, the brand which old Alamo had chosen because his original ranch encompassed a township of thirty-six

sections of prime Basin land, holding it despite all the carpetbagging Yankees could do.

RIDING through the mottled shade of the *brasada* jungle, Thornton felt the bitter totality of defeat bogging him down. The future was black. In all likelihood the Stockman's Bank would throw Box 36 on the open market when Thornton failed to meet the interest on old Alamo's note at the end of April, only a few days away. The beef contract Thornton had brought back from San Antone with him, a promise of money which he had depended on to win an extension from the bank, was a worthless scrap of paper now that Brockway's butchers had taken over his herd.

There would be buyers eager to seize Thornton's graze. The Stilsons, if they had the cash to swing the deal, would like nothing better than to add the Box 36 to their holdings and thus be able to dominate the Basin and fight off the encroaching grangers whom Ozee Cutler and his land syndicate were bringing to the Big Bend.

In his present mood, Thornton would rather have seen surveyors chop up the Box 36 into rutabaga patches and sell it to the nesters than see it stocked with longhorns bearing a Turkey Track brand . . .

Zopilote buzzards wheeling over the brasada south of the trail Thornton was following prevailed upon the puncher to rein in that direction, toward the focal point of the predatory spirals of the winged scavengers of the sky.

Breaking free of the thorny brush, Thornton caught sight of a dead cow lying beside a waterhole that was fed by the seepage of Salina Creek during the spring season.

Thornton's grulla shied away from the bloated carcass of the cow as the Box 36 rider approached the waterhole. He saw the ravages of hoof and mouth disease on the animal at first glance.

In the act of reining back toward the trail, his eye spotted a length of lariat rope flung across the sun-baked mud of the waterhole.

Ground-tying his mount, Thornton approached the stagnant pool to the windward of the dead cow, scaring a squawking cloud of buzzards away from the carrion. The heat-checkered adobe crackled under the weight of his spike-heeled Coffeyvilles as he squatted down to inspect the rope.

The lariat had apparently been dropped by some passing rider who had paused to water his mount here. But it was no ordinary hemp or sisal reata. It was a beautiful *mecate* of pleated horsehair, alternate braids of sorrel and blanco forming a pretty checkered design, a tricky cube pattern.

Thornton picked up the loose end of the *mecate* and drew its prickly length across a palm, inspecting the beautiful workmanship at close range.

"Julie Stilson—"

The name of Morf Stilson's sister broke through Thornton's clamped teeth as he recognized the workmanship of the horsehair rope. Julie made a hobby of fashioning these hair ropes; Cloyd had admired exquisite specimens of her handiwork on sale at a saddle shop down in Sixprong.

Using red and black and white horsehair, the girl manufactured halters and catch-ropes which brought fat prices from admiring buckaroos in town.

Thornton recalled, with a flush of embarrassment, how once he had threatened to fire a Box 36 wrangler for fetching one of the "Julie Stilson Specials" back to the bunkhouse after a trip to town.

A notch carved itself between Thornton's brows as he started to coil the mud-caked rope over his arm. What was one of Julie Stilson's lariats doing here at a Box 36 waterhole?

Then he discovered that the honda end of the *mecate* was submerged in the brackish waters of the pool, attached to an anchoring object too heavy for him to budge.

The scowl deepened on Thornton's brow as he whistled his grulla over to the waterhole, threw a couple of dallies around his saddle horn and let the horse take up the slack. A moment later the horse dragged a muddy, dripping object out of the water, bringing a swarm of blowflies toward it.

A fetid odor assailed Thornton's nostrils as he walked over to inspect the waterlogged object. It was the swollen carcass of a sheep, a ram far gone with hoof and mouth disease . . .

"This is how my range got infected so sudden, by God—"

The words tore from Cloyd Thornton's lips in a rush as he drew a knife from his chaps pocket and severed the hair rope a

foot away from the neck of the putrified ram.

Coiling the rope, Thornton stepped into stirrups and spurred away from the waterhole, heading away from the Box 36 in a beeline across the Basin floor. Five miles in that direction would bring him to the ranch house where Julie and Morf Stilson lived, a ranch he had not visited since the day he had taken Jesse Stilson for his brother Dennis' murder.

His first rush of anger and shock gave way to a brooding, murderous passion for revenge. Thornton was positive he knew, now, the source of the dread epidemic which had brought the Box 36 to irrevocable ruin.

It was characteristic of the man that he headed toward the home camp of his enemy, rather than reporting his discovery to a duly constituted authority, Range Inspector Ford Brockway. A Texan was schooled to handle his private war his own way, without recourse to outside law . . .

The whole outrageous thing stood out clear and sharp in Thornton's mind as he rode. The evidence of the hair rope loomed in his eyes as indisputable, conclusive proof of guilt. Such a monstrous crime could only be squared with gunsmoke.

During his absence from the Box 36, the feuding Stilsons had brought the carcass of a disease-riddled sheep onto his land, from some woolie range down on the Rio most likely. He had heard vague rumors of hoof and mouth disease ravaging the bands of sheep along the border this spring.

Morf Stilson, most likely, or some cowhand riding in his pay, could have infected the entire Box 36 graze overnight by dragging the diseased carcass of the dead ram up and down the Salina waterholes, at the end of one of Julie's fancy ropes. Wherever the foul carrion touched, it left a trail of corruption to infect Box 36 animals.

His ghastly errand finished, Morf Stilson had probably dumped the diseased carcass into the last waterhole on his circuit, along with the tell-tale rope. But the waterhole, drying up fast under the punishing April sun, had evaporated sufficiently to reveal the loose end of the rope, exactly as Thornton had discovered it today . . .

Even in his wildest moments of hatred for the Stilsons and anything connected with the Turkey Track, Cloyd Thornton knew he would never have stooped to importing hoof and mouth disease onto his rival's range. There were some methods of vengeance which were too damnable, too low and stinking to impose even on the feuding Yankee clan.

Westering sunrays slanted across the indigo rim of Horseshoe Basin to squint Thorton's eyes as he followed the six-strand barbed wire "spite fence" up the township line which bisected the Basin and marked the boundary between Turkey Track and Box 36 graze.

He found a break in the fence where a spring freshet had washed out a few posts and spurred his grulla onto Turkey Track soil for the first time in half a decade.

The sense that he was invading enemy ground, bait for an ambush gun from the first Turkey Track cowboy who recognized him, caused Thornton to ride with his carbine out of leather, alert for trouble.

DUSK was cooling the Turkey Track flats when Thornton emerged from the *brasada* to see the whitewashed barns and corrals and silo of the Stilson spread looming ahead.

He saw the burly figure of the Turkey Track ramrod, Lant Braze, spot him from the door of a blacksmith shop as he rode past. The *segundo* stared in amazement as Thornton reined up in front of the rambling California-style ranch house which old Colonel Jerrod had built for his family with carpetbag money a generation ago.

A yellow-painted democrat wagon was hitched at the rail fence in front of the house. Thornton's lips curled with disgust as he saw the legend SIXPRONG LAND INVESTMENT SYNDICATE lettered in red across the wagon box, branding the rig as belonging to the land shark, Ozee Cutler.

Birds of a feather, the thought ran through Thornton's head as he pouched his saddle gun and stepped to the ground, removing the coiling of mud-caked horsehair rope from the horn.

It was common knowledge around the Basin of late that Ozee Cutler was sparking Julie Stilson, and the thought galled Thornton. What a girl with Julie's looks could see in a slick-tongued four-flusher of Cutler's stripe he was at a loss to fathom.

He loosened the .44 Walker at his thigh from a force of habit as he trailed his spurs

up the steps onto the tile-roofed gallery fronting the Turkey Track ranch headquarters.

In view of the purpose of his visit, he had mentally rehearsed how he would kick open the front door without a knock, throw the horsehair *mecate* in Morf Stilson's face and demand a showdown on the spot.

But his plans went awry. In the act of approaching the door, it swung open to reveal the startled blue eyes and slim figure of a girl, clad in a split buckskin riding skirt and a fancy apricot-colored rodeo blouse.

"Cloyd!" gasped Juliana Stilson, astonishment turning to hostility sharpening her voice as she met his lithic scowl. "What on earth brings a Thornton to Turkey Track?"

Thorton shrugged, knowing the memories which his presence here awoke in the girl. The last time he had stood on this porch, he had thrown a gun on big Jesse Stilson and started the heir to Turkey Track on his one-way pasear toward a Texas hangrope. Julie had been a pigtailed tomboy then, as yet unripened into the beauty of mature womanhood, and she had worshipped the ground Jesse walked on. To Julie, the man standing at her threshold now was the same as Jesse Stilson's murderer.

"Like usual, I'm after one of your brothers," Thornton snapped callously, pushing her into a shadowy hallway.

Julie closed the door uncertainly, aware that Lant Braze and two-three Turkey Track brush hands were walking up from the bunkhouse, ready to back Stilson's play in event of trouble.

"Morf's inside pow-wowing with Ozee Cutler," the girl said uncertainly. "Cloyd—if you've come here looking for a ruckus tonight, don't prod Morf. He's—he's in trouble. He's as short-tempered as a brimmer bull in dog days."

Cloyd Thornton's glance lingered briefly on the girl, noting that her eyes were red-rimmed as if from weeping. Somehow, tears did not go with a high-spirited young filly like Julie Stilson.

"I ain't exactly in a mellow mood myself," the Box 36 boss clipped drily. "I reckon Morf will know why I'm here when he sees this damned hosshair rope that you made."

CHAPTER TWO

Back to the Wall

THORNTON pushed through a mesquite-bean portiere which screened the living room archway off the hall, to see Morf Stilson and Ozee Cutler hunkered over a table in front of a massive rock fireplace.

A big oil painting of Colonel Jerrod Stilson in blue regimentals dominated the wall above the mantel, the steely-eyed old warrior's personality seeming to pervade this citadel he had founded in carpetbagger days.

The two men glanced up from the papers lying on the desk between them as they caught the jingle of Thornton's spurs crossing the room. Thornton's eyes were boring toward Morf, ignoring the land promoter.

Stilson kicked back his chair and came to a crouching rise, splayed fingers poised over a cedar-butted Colt at his flank as he saw the grim hatred which twisted Thornton's face.

Julie appeared in the archway behind the Box 36 rider as Morf Stilson found his voice:

"Ain't very particular what breed o' skunks you let in the house these days, are you, Sis?"

Thorton ignored the thrust, planting his feet wide spread on a Navajo rug in front of the table, taking Stilson's measure. He had not seen his neighbor in over a year, and it seemed that Morf had put on weight and maturity in that time.

Stilson stood six foot three without benefit of stilt-heeled Justin cowboots or the felted beaver Stetson which hung at his shoulder now, held there by a pleated chinstrap circling his neck.

His face, ordinarily handsome and clean-cut, was flushed now as if he had been drinking heavily, white spots standing out lividly over his cheekbones. Thornton got the impression that he had interrupted a quarrel between the Turkey Track boss and Ozee Cutler.

Thornton's left arm shot out and flung the coiled lariat on a pile of greenbacks on the table in front of Morf Stilson. His voice came in a grim monotone that told of the man's iron control over his temper.

"I'm returning some property you left

in a Box 36 waterhole while I was in San Antone, Morf. Recognize that mecarty?"

Julie Stilson passed close to Thornton's side then, staring at the deft cube-pleating of the rope.

"Why ,that's one of my ropes," the girl said. "I'd recognize it anywhere—"

Ozee Cutler, sensing that a showdown of some sort was coming to a boil between these avowed enemies, got to his feet and coughed discreetly, drawing Thornton's eye in his direction.

"Reckon I'll be going," the land speculator said unctuously. "Be seeing you later, Morf."

Cutler was a giant of a man, his hair still coal black at forty-five, his belly beginning to show the signs of a paunch. His massive shoulders were encased in a well-tailored fustian Prince Albert and he wore a buckwing collar and black string tie and a bed-of-flowers vest which made him resemble a tinhorn gambler.

Morf Stilson ignored the land shark's remark as he met Thornton's glare.

"No Thorton would visit Turkey Track to do a Stilson a favor," he blurted angrily. "What's the load on your chest, Cloyd? I don't cotton to your company around here."

Thornton stood his ground with a dogged grin settling on his lips, a grin which was not matched by the wrath kindling in his narrowed orbs.

"The honda-end of that rope is tied to a dead sheep over in one of my waterholes, Morf. A sheep rotten with hoof and mouth disease. A ram you drug onto my range to wipe me out. Or didn't you know that a C.A. quarantine man is barbecuing my stock over in Salina Canyon today?"

Ozee Cutler hastily scooped papers off the table into a go-easter bag, took a biscuit-colored Stetson off the mantel and turned to face Julie.

"You'll see me out to my wagon, Julie?" Cutler asked with a fawning smile which women found enchanting. "I think Mr. Thornton and your brother have business to settle in private."

WHEN Cutler and the girl had left the room, Morf Stilson sucked a long breath across his teeth, dragged a trembling hand across his face and slumped into a raw-hide-laced chair.

"I've had the guts ripped out of me this afternoon, Cloyd," he said heavily. "I'm too sick-like to tell you to go to hell. . . You ought to know that no cowman would knowingly bring hoof and mouth disease into country bordering on his own range, no matter if he hated his neighbor's guts like I hate yours. Disease is no respecter of ranch boundaries or spite fences. I don't know anything about your damned sheep or your polluted waterhole or this rope that Sis made."

It was a long speech for the taciturn Stilson, and its effect on Cloyd Thornton was anticlimactic. He had come here keyed for shoot-out, fully expecting the Turkey Track cowboy to go for his gun. Instead, Morf's words carried an implication of defeat which had nothing to do with personal cowardice.

"You mean to tell me . . ."

Thornton's voice trailed off. Outside in the dusk, they heard the creak of wagon wheels as Ozee Cutler turned his buckboard around and whipped his mules into a gallop. They heard the low voices of Lant Brase and Julie Stilson, arguing about something.

"Ford Brockway slaughtered everything on hoofs inside Turkey Track last week while you were away, Cloyd," Stilson went on. "Hoof and mouth broke out over the whole Basin at once. Brockway's crew didn't move onto Box 36 range until day before yesterday."

There was no fight left in Morf Stilson. The spirit of the man appeared to have been crushed by the avalanche of disaster which had devastated Horseshoe Basin in the span of a week, forcing Stilson's back to the wall.

"This means we're wiped out, then," Thornton said huskily. "But the fact remains that hoof and mouth disease come into the Basin by design, not accidentally. What do you make of me finding one of Julie's ropes on that sheep?"

Morf Stilson shrugged.

"Any hombre could have bought one of Sis's horsehair ropes down in Sixprong. It don't mean a thing, Cloyd—unless whoever done the job left the rope at your waterhole in the hopes you'd come gunning for a Stilson."

Thornton rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. It seemed, in that moment of Stilson's declaration of surrender before unsurmountable odds, that the painted image of old Colonel Jerrod staring down at them

from the gold-framed mantel picture bore an expression of mingled grief and disgust.

"You'll be glad to know that us Stilsons are pulling our picket pins, Cloyd," Morf went on morosely. He waved a hand at the pile of currency on the table. "I just got through selling Turkey Track to Ozee Cutler's syndicate. This time a year from now my ranch will be under the plow, swarmin' with hayshakers."

Thornton swallowed hard.

"You let Cutler buy you out—without fightin' him?"

Morf Stilson was stung by the implication of Thornton's words.

"It don't matter a damn to me what Cutler does with the spread. I was lucky to salvage what dinero Ozee was willing to pay me, seeing as how Turkey Track ain't got a beef critter left on the hoof. I sold out even though Julie fought the idea every step of the way. I know when I'm licked, Thornton."

Stilson swung around to face the crackling flames in the hearth, obviously terminating their interview. He did not appear to notice Cloyd Thornton's turning on his heel and stalking grimly out of the house.

Julie Stilson was feeding an apple to Thornton's grulla when the Box 36 man reached the tie rack out front. He saw no trace of Lant Braze or his Turkey Track hands.

"Morf told you—about Turkey Track?" the girl asked, as he swung into stirrups.

He nodded, staring down at her. Sunset glow put highlights in the girl's clustering ringlets of rich auburn hair, accentuated the firm lift of her boson.

"Yeah," he said finally. "But with you fixing to become the future Missus Cutler, what's the diff? Turkey Track will stay in the family."

Without waiting to appraise the effect of his curt rejoinder on the girl, Thornton curvetted his horse out from the hitchrack and galloped off in the thickening dusk, his eye drawn to the ugly pillar of smoke which towered like a black tombstone over the ravaged wastes of his Box 36 range.

So the Stilsons had chosen to throw in their chips, he thought somberly. Yankees didn't have the guts to fight back when the going got rough. . . But he would be damned if a Texan would take the easy way out, even if that damned Ozee Cutler offered him a fortune to buy the Box 36.

FORD BROCKWAY'S quarantine squad completed their grisly business on the Box 36 two days later. Except for a few ringy old *ladino* steers who were too far back in the thickets to be popped out into the slaughtering ground by Brockway's Mexican vaqueros, Horseshoe Basin had been purged of stock, as primitive as it had been in the days before Spanish cattle had accompanied the *conquistadores* northward in search of fabulous Cibola.

Cloyd Thornton paid the C.A. inspector a visit the day following his trip to the Turkey Track spread.

Seeking out Brockway at the latter's camp in Salina Canyon, Thornton insisted on the quarantine official riding over to the waterhole to inspect the evidence of the bloated sheep's carcass.

Brockway eyed the ram's carcass without interest.

"No dice, Thornton. This don't prove a thing. Sheep stray, the same as cattle."

"There are no sheep within a hundred miles of Horseshoe, Brockway. This ram was dead and rotten before it was deliberately dragged up here to pollute cattle range."

Brockway shook his head.

"You got no proof that this woolie didn't cross into the Basin and get infected *after* it reached Box 36 water, Thornton."

Brockway turned back to his piebald mare and swung astride, clearly dismissing any further official interest in the evidence Thornton had shown him.

"If you got the dinero to ride this thing out, okay," the quarantine officer grunted. "Otherwise, with your range ruined for at least another season, I'd advise you to sell your saddle. Let the grangers move in with their plows and their bobwire. The Basin is finished for cowmen."

Thornton bent the quarantiner a questioning stare.

"Are you wearing Cutler's collar?" he demanded suspiciously. "Do you think there's enough water in Alkali River to water this basin, even if Cutler finishes that dam—which I don't believe he has the slightest intention of doing?"

Brockway's eyes held a flicker of anger as they rode slowly away from the waterhole.

"I wouldn't let Cutler hear you making that kind of wild talk, son. His promotion scheme is no skin offn my nose. If he can talk farmers into investing in Basin land, it's their lookout. I won't discuss the deal with you or nobody else."

Where the trail forked off toward the Box 36, Thornton gave the range officer a last thrust.

"Horseshoe Basin is cow country and always will be, Brockway. *Brasada* country can't be cleared for farming, even if there was water enough to irrigate crops, which there ain't. Ozee Cutler is running a swindle on the nesters, and you can tell him I said so for all I give a damn."

THE day after Brockway's slaughtering crew moved out with their oil tank and bedroll wagon and the Mexicans' remuda, Thornton called a meeting of his Box 36 crew at the bunkhouse.

"Unless Nate Flieshman sees fit to extend my note down at the bank, Box 36 is finished, men," Thornton laid his cards on the table. "Most of you have been with Box 36 since before my old man was killed. You know I'd fight to my last cartridge to hold onto this land. But if the bank forecloses on me, you rannihans will have to drift elsewhere to rent your ropes. I'll be back with enough dinero to pay you what wages you got coming. Other than that, I don't know what the future holds in store."

Within the hour Thornton saddled up a leggy gelding and headed for Sixprong, the county seat town situated in the center of Horseshoe Basin in a curve of Alkali River.

Despair rode with the Texan today, for he had no illusions regarding the outcome of his interview with Nate Flieshman, the banker who held old Alamo's note, due and payable this week.

Ordinarily, he knew the bank would be glad to tide over a cattle outfit with an extension, even another loan, as it had done in the past. But the coming of Ozee Cutler with his well-heeled land syndicate altered the complexion of things.

Cutler aimed to dam the Alkali and sell stock in a water company to the grangers who were flocking into the Basin in droves, drawn by the lure of cheap farm land. With Turkey Track now added to Cutler's holdings, the syndicate needed only the Box 36 to control the entire Basin, north and south.

An hour later, Thornton rode into town from the north, passing the hastily-built soddies and tent city of the dry-land farmers who had gathered by the scores on the outskirts of the cowtown.

Heading up the main street, Thornton made his first stop at the Overland Telegraph officie and dispatched a message to the packery brokers in San Antone, canceling his beef contract.

Then he entered the Stockman's Bank and drew enough money from Joe Cramer, the cashier, to pay off his Box 36 hands. That done, he badgered Nate Flieshman in the latter's office.

Flieshman's reaction to his plea for an extension was exactly what Thornton had expected.

"Ozee Cutler has already offered to buy your father's note and put fifty thousand cash on the barrel head for title to your spread, son," the banker said gravely. "With hoof and mouth disease wiping you out, it may be years before you could restock. I'm afraid under the circumstances I'm forced to start foreclosure proceedings, Thornton—much as I hate the idea. You know I served with Jeb Stuart under your father's command—"

Thornton grinned bleakly.

"You've always been my friend, Nate, and I see your p'int of view," the cowboy said. "But let me remind you that your bank was built with cow money. If Cutler settles the Basin with dry farmers, I'll give your bank five years at the outside before it goes bust. You know the Alkali won't yield the water to irrigate the flats, no matter how many ditches Cutler digs or how many dams he builds. Cutler's a four-flushing crook and you should be the first to warn the grangers."

Flieshman flushed angrily.

"I wouldn't advise you to spout that kind of war talk around the bars here in town, son," the banker snapped. "The hoe men who are waiting to move onto Turkey Track and Bar 36 land worship the ground Cutler walks on."

Stalking out of the bank, Thornton visited the postoffice to pick up what mail had accumulated during his absence. He was loading his saddlebags out at the postoffice hitch rack when he heard a harsh voice call his name from the porch of the

Silver Saddle Saloon across the street.

Peering over the cantle, Thornton recognized the Turkey Track *segundo,* Lant Braze, weaving in a drunken zig-zag across the street.

As foreman of the Turkey Track since the days of old Colonel Jerrod, Braze had drawn a hand in the range feud, the same as if Stilson blood ran in his veins. Now, his senses inflamed by an excess of whiskey, Lant Braze was patently looking for trouble.

"I got a bone to pick with you, you damned Johnny Reb!" Braze snarled thickly, not unaware of the audience of grangers who lined the board sidewalks. "I heard you badgered Morf in his den the other night and accused him of startin' that hoof and mouth epidemic on Basin graze."

Cloyd groaned as he saw Braze come up to his horse and halt, swaying unsteadily on saddle-warped legs. He had no wish to quarrel with the big Turkey Track ramrod, but side-stepping trouble wouldn't be easy.

Unhitching his gelding and mounting, Cloyd Thornton felt impatience needle him as he saw sodbusters gathering in excited knots on saloon porches and in livery stable doorways, anticipating a cowboy brawl.

"You're drunk, Braze," Thornton said coldly. "Whatever business I had with Morf was settled between the two of us. There's no call for you to stick in your taw, even if you draw Turkey Track wages."

Lant Braze lurched over to lay a heavy hand on the bit ring of Thornton's mount. His bottle-green eyes flashed with raw hatred as he stared up at the cool-voiced waddy in the saddle.

"No yeller-bellied Thornton can make talk like that to a Stilson as long as I'm ramroddin' the Turkey Track!" Braze shouted in a voice which carried the length and breadth of the street. "Climb down offn that kak, you snake-livered Texican, and I'll whup you to a frazzle and stomp you six feet into the ground."

Thornton unleashed a quirt from his saddle horn, leaned forward and clubbed the lash in a blurring arc across Braze's thick-boned forearm.

The stinging lash drew blood from Braze's hairy wrist, brought a yelp of pain from the man as he snatched his hand free of the bit ring and lurched backwards, nearly falling when his gooseneck spurs tripped on a tin can in the ruts. "I'll see you in hell for that, Thornton—"

As he spoke Lant Braze hauled a Colt .45 from leather and whipped up the muzzle, his thumb earing the knurled hammer back to full cock.

A clock-tick of time stood between Thornton and hot lead doom. Dropping the shot-loaded quirt in the dust, the Box 36 boss lashed out a boot which smashed soddenly against Braze's jaw.

Knocked sprawling, the Turkey Track foreman jerked trigger, driving a bullet through the rawhide-laced brim of Thornton's hat.

Diving out of stirrups, his own gun still in holster, Cloyd kicked the six-gun from Braze's fist and stooped to grab the foreman by the armholes of his calfhide vest.

Hauling the range bully to his feet, Thornton drove a rocky uppercut to Braze's mouth. Blood spurted and a loose tooth hit the dust as Braze reeled back, bawling profanity, clawing at the second six-gun holstered for cross draw at his flank.

Dropping to a quick squat, Thornton scooped up his fallen quirt, grabbing it by the lash thongs. Braze's second gun was half clear of leather when Thornton laid the shot-weighted handle of the quirt across the foreman's temple.

Braze wilted to the dust, knocked cold.

Yelling sodbusters drew a circle around the fallen giant as Thornton stooped to jacknife Braze's inert, bloody bulk over a shoulder. Striding over to the hitchbar in front of the Silver Saddle deadfall, Thornton loaded the Stilson foreman across the saddle of a Turkey-Track branded mustang he recognized as Braze's personal mount.

Then, unbuckling the coiled lariat from Braze's pommel, he tied the unconscious man securely to the saddle, unhitched the mustang and led it across the street to where his gelding waited.

"You going to string him up, mister? Can I watch you, huh?" shrilled a nester kid, dancing up with barefooted excitement.

Ignoring the crowding grangers, Thornton tied a hackamore from Braze's horse to his saddle horn, mounted, and headed the horses through the crowd.

Grangers watched mutely as the two rode out of town, disappointed at the spectacle of seeing a Thornton pass up a chance to

draw what amounted to Stilson blood. The old feud must be petering out. . .

* * *

Sundown was gilding the North Rim peaks of the Basin when Thornton reached the fork of the road at the south end of the spite fence, one pair of tracks branching off toward the Turkey Track, the other leading to the Bar 36.

Braze was conscious now. He showed no sign of resistance when Cloyd Thornton untied his bonds and helped him back into saddle.

"Ride back to your bunkhouse and sleep off this jag, Braze," Thornton advised the glowering *segundo*. "So far as I'm concerned, things are settled up between us. Seeing as how the Basin is being overrun with hay-pitchers, I figger it's a shame us cowmen can't stick together."

Braze lowered his eyes sheepishly.

"Mebbe you're right, Cloyd," he admitted. "I had no call to rowel you back in town. . . Shake on it"

A moment later Braze clapped spurs to his mustang and vanished up the *brasada*-jungled road, leaving Thornton to head on alone toward the Box 36.

It was getting dark when the wind off the western peaks carried to Thornton's ears the far-off report of a rifle shot. A Stilson cowboy had probably shot a disease-rotten *ladino* steer he had flushed out of Turkey Track brush, most likely. . .

CHAPTER THREE

Nesters' Verdict

THE ruddy glare of dawn was shafting through the windows of Cloyd Thornton's frame ranch house when the cowman was roused from slumber by a hard hand shaking his shoulder.

He reared erect in the blankets, reaching automatically for the gunbelt and holstered .45 he habitually kept on his bedpost. But his hand brushed empty space. The gun harness was missing from its accustomed place.

Pulling his eyes into focus, Thornton twisted his head to see the burly figure of Sheriff Tom Radlock towering at his bedside. Thornton's shell belt was looped over the lawman's shoulder and Radlock held a sidehammer Root revolver in one fist, its .36 bore trained on Thornton's bare chest.

"Shake out of it and haul on yore boots and pants, Cloyd!" the Sixprong sheriff said gruffly. "We're takin' a little pasear back to town before breakfast."

The last traces of sleep still drugging his senses, Thornton swung his legs out from under the soogans and stood up, flexing his lean muscles, still believing his old friend was joshing him.

"What's up, sheriff?" he yawned. "You in a habit of busting into houses and pulling guns on sleepers?"

Radlock's tobacco-stained mustache twitched. There was no josh mirrored in his narrowed eyes.

"I got a warrant for your arrest, Cloyd. That gives me a right to throw my dallies the way I see fit."

Thorton's jaw sagged, wide awake and deadly serious now.

"Warrant? For what?"

Radlock grinned crookedly.

"Got a short memory, ain't you? For murder. What else?"

For several seconds Thornton was too stunned to react.

"Murder?" he echoed finally. "Who was killed?"

Radlock reached over to a chair and tossed a shirt and bibless levis in the cattleman's direction.

"Lant Braze, the Turkey Track straw boss. He was dead when he reached Stilson's place around midnight, aboard his mustang. Had a bullet where his suspenders crossed. That was a foolish thing to do, flauntin' your killing in the Stilsons' faces thataway."

Thornton pulled on his overalls and shirt, digesting the sheriff's news dazedly. His mind flashed back to the gunshot he had heard last night, after seeing Braze off on the Turkey Track road, the memory of their handshake still warm in his heart.

"I'll come with you peaceable, Tom, so pouch your gun," Thornton drawled. "If I had figgered on shooting Braze, I had plenty of call to do so in self-defense when he jumped me in front of the Silver Saddle yesterday afternoon."

Radlock looked on warily while Thornton tugged on his star boots and took his Stetson off a deerhorn rack above the bed.

"Ozee Cutler swore out the warrant," he explained. "He witnessed your ruckus

with Braze from the window of the syndicate office yesterday. The whole town seen you ride off into the brush with Braze tied up like a leppie in a brandin' chute. Cutler figgers you shot Braze in the back and sent him on to the Turkey Track as a gesture of defiance to the Stilsons."

On their way out of the ranch house, a sudden hunch struck Thornton.

"But I untied Lant's hands and feet before I left him at the fork of the road. We parted friendly, matter of fact. Who-ever 'gulched Braze did so after we separated."

Sheriff Radlock grunted skeptically.

"I believe your story, Thornton. But will a judge an' jury, remembering your feud with Turkey Track? When Julie discovered Braze, his corpse was tied to the saddle. Braze was ambushed without a chance."

* * *

Justice moved fast in the Texas Big Bend country. Spending that night behind bars in the Sixprong calaboose, Cloyd Thornton found himself standing before a judge in the county courthouse by ten o'clock the next day, charged with the ambush murder of Lantrey Braze.

News of the murder had spread throughout the Basin and the courthouse was packed with cowmen and grangers, including Julie Stilson and her brother from the Turkey Track and the Box 36 crew which Thornton had paid off the evening before.

The jury, as finally impaneled, turned out to be packed with sodbusters from the mob who were camped outside of town waiting to buy stock in Cutler's irrigation company.

As the morning dragged on, the prosecutor demanded the death sentence from the outset. The defense, however, hammered at certain discrepancies in the case which the jury, however hostile its tendencies might be toward a cowman, could not in justice overlook.

No man had seen the actual shooting. The bullet which the coroner dug out of Braze's spine was a steel-jacketed .44-40, whereas Thornton's saddle gun was a .30-30 with soft-nose shells in its magazine.

But the long-standing Thornton-Stilson feud was dragged out of the past and admitted as evidence over the defense attorney's vigorous protests. Witnesses, including several members of the jury, had seen Thornton's brawl with Lant Braze, and had seen Braze riding out of town as Thornton's prisoner, roped to the saddle and his holsters empty.

Julie Stilson, giving testimony under oath, described how her foreman's horse had reached the Turkey Track around midnight with Braze's corpse securely bound to the saddle with his own lariat.

After the noon recess the opposing lawyers finished their summations of the case and the jury retired to its chambers to deliberate a verdict. In view of the fact that the popular Ozee Cutler was backing the charges against him, Thornton knew his chances of beating a gallows rope were not brighter than 50-50.

The jury emerged from its conference an hour later and the foreman, a lanky sodbuster from Indiana whose Hoosier twang fell like an alien tongue on Texas ears, announced that the defendant had been found guilty but that the jury recommended lenience in view of the circumstantial nature of the evidence.

Handcuffed to Sheriff Radlock's wrist, Cloyd Thornton stood up to receive sentence. He was aware that Julie and Morf Stilson had left the courtroom during the jury's intermission and had not returned to gloat over what amounted to the triumphant end of the Stilson-Thornton feud.

"You are hereby sentenced to the custody of the warden of the Texas State Penitentiary at Santa Castro," the judge intoned, "to begin a sentence of not less than ten years at hard labor and not more than twenty years. . . According to the statutes of the State of Texas you are entitled to an appeal to a higher court, or to consideration for parole upon expiration of seven years, six months of your minimum sentence. . ."

The defense lawyer assigned to Cloyd Thornton closeted himself with the Box 36 rider in a cell of the Sixprong jailhouse that evening, discussing the possibility of taking an appeal.

"It's obvious that you're bucking a stacked deck, son," the attorney said frankly, verifying Thornton's own suspicions. "Ozee Cutler swings a lot of weight in this territory, and he's out to nail your hide to a fence for obvious reasons. By the time we could get a new trial, it's ten to one that Cutler could dig up a witness who'd swear on a stack of Bibles that he actually saw you

bushwhack Lant Braze. He was so confident of railroading you to a death sentence that he slipped up on producing such a witness at this trial."

As an upshot of his discussion with his counsel, Thornton elected to start his prison term immediately. His father's range feud was a black mark on his record, but years would temper the parole board with mercy and the odds were strong in his favor that a seven-year stretch would see him granted a full pardon.

The following day, Sixprong's main street was jammed with nesters and sullen-faced Bar 36 cowboys assembled to see Sheriff Tom Radlock start for Santa Castro with his prisoner, taking a Wells-Fargo stage to Del Rio on the first leg of their journey.

Ozee Cutler and the Cattle Association man, Ford Brockway, were standing on the porch of the Land Investment Syndicate's office when the Concord rumbled out of town, its yellow wheels shrouding the scene with cascading dust.

No one from the Turkey Track was present to see him off to seven years on the rockpile, Thornton noted bitterly. The Stilsons had spared him that ultimate humiliation, at any rate. . .

DUST and heat made the interior of the stagecoach untenable for passengers. Fifteen miles out of Sixprong, Sheriff Radlock condescended to unlock the handcuffs which fettered him to Thornton's wrist and they moved up top with the jehu.

The thoroughbraced Concord jounced like a ship in heavy seas as the Morgan team toiled up the long grade of the Sunblaze range, snaking into the notch of Ocotillo Pass. Thornton, sandwiched between Radlock and the driver, braced his feet against the whipstock and appeared to be dozing.

The prospect of spending seven years of his life behind the gray walls of the bastille at Santa Castro wrankled Thornton, pulled his nerves taut, filling him with wild ideas of escape.

Apparently asleep, he weighed his chances of grabbing up the Wells-Fargo shotgun from the floor of the boot and covering Radlock and the driver. If he could force his captors to unharness the team, he might make a getaway to the Rio Grande on one of the Morgans, go on the dodge in Mexico, beyond the reach of Texas law.

Shooting a covert glance at the sheriff, he saw that Tom Radlock had no intention of relaxing his vigilance during this hot and gruelling ride. The rawboned sheriff, friend of his boyhood years, kept a hand alert on gun butt and his eyes were slitted against the dust and glare, vital and alert.

At the summit of the Sunblaze divide, midway through the cliff-walled corridor of the Pass, the driver pulled up his team to rest and, wrapping his lines around the brake handle, swung down over the front wheel to adjust a loose hame on a swingspanner.

Radlock unhooked a canvas waterbag from the jacobstaff and swigged a long drink before wiping off the spout and handing the bag to his prisoner. The sheriff's rheumy eyes fixed themselves gravely on Cloyd Thornton, recalling the time when this hard-eyed prisoner of his had been a barefoot kid bracing him for empty cartridges to play with.

Cloyd Thornton was cut the right way of the leather. His dogged insistence in court that he was being framed for the Turkey Track *segundo's* killing had made a profound impression on the Sixprong sheriff. Heading now toward the hell-hole at Santa Castro, Radlock had the uncomfortable prescience that he was being party to a miscarriage of justice.

"This case ain't settled, so far as I'm concerned, Cloyd," Radlock grunted, cutting himself a quid of plug tobacco. "While you're bustin' rocks at Santa Castro, don't forget that I'll be watchin' every move that Ozee Cutler makes. If he chose this frame-up as a quick way to grab off the Box 36, somewhere along the line he'll tip his cards. Paid killers have a way of getting in their cups and bragging about a bushwhack deal. It was a .44-40 that drilled Braze and you ain't owned a gun of that caliber since I've known you, man and boy."

Thornton grinned bleakly as he returned the waterbag to the sheriff. His mind was on the stagedriver's buckshot gun, within easy reach of his free arm. If he could club down Radlock in an off-guarded moment, he would have the grounded jehu at his mercy . . .

"Forget it, sheriff," Thorton grunted. "Seven years ain't forever. If Cutler is still around when I get out, I'll square my accounts with that land shark, don't worry about that."

The white-bearded stage tooler was climbing back to the boot now. Radlock was momentarily busy restoring the water-bag to its hook on the jacobstaff. Now, if ever, was Thorton's opportunity to make a break for freedom—

In the act of bracing himself for a quick grab at the shotgun, Thorton saw a rider spur out of the chaparral in front of the team, a Winchester leveled at them.

The rider was clad in a yellow slicker which concealed the details of his garb. A red bandanna was drawn over the rider's face, slitted eyes shadowed by the brim of a Mexican straw hat.

"Reach, sheriff!" ordered a harsh voice behind the mask. "We aim to chouse that prisoner you're haulin' off to Castro."

Tom Radlock jerked erect, hand frozen in the act of grabbing a gun from holster. The stage driver, his head level with the seat rail, whispered a hoarse warning to Radlock as he caught sight of another road agent standing on a ledge level with the top of the Concord.

The oily click of a six-gun hammer being eared to full cock drew the sheriff's eye over to where the second outlaw, masked and slicker-clad, stood behind a prickly-pear clump on the ledge. Caught between leveled guns, Radlock groped his arm aloft.

"You, driver!" yelled the mounted outlaw. "Climb down and unhitch yore team. You and the star-toter are going to have to hoof it back to Sixprong."

The trembling stagedriver, remembering the box of specie behind the boot curtain, hastened to obey orders, unhooking tug-straps from whiffletrees.

"Sheriff, toss your gun over to my partner," was the outlaw's next order. "Then you and Thornton climb offn that stage."

When Radlock had complied, the gunman spurred closer as the sheriff and his prisoner climbed down to the road.

The stage team, released from the traces, moved away from the stagecoach.

"Stand aside, jehu!" warned the outlaw.

The Wells-Fargo man cursed under his breath as the horses dropped the wagon tongue and, spooked by the outlaw's waving rifle barrel, broke into a gallop and stampeded out of sight down the curving road of the Pass.

"Thornton, head back into the brush!" ordered the masked rider. "Try to follow us, Radlock, and you'll draw a slug in the guts, savvy?"

Cloyd Thornton moved around behind the rifle-toter's horse and pushed his way up a weed-grown trail opening through the chaparral. At the moment, he believed he was the victim of Ozee Cutler's gunhawks, sent to trail the stagecoach as a means of imposing the death sensence where the jurymen had failed.

The masked rider followed him up the chaparral path, covering Thornton's back with the Winchester. At the top of the ledge Thornton was joined by the second outlaw.

Before Thornton could speak, the outlaw was handing him the sheriff's six-gun. Then, as the Box 36 rancher stared in amazement at this unexpected development, the outlaw tugged off her mask to reveal her face.

"Julie!" Thornton gasped hoarsely, rec-

TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER

ognizing Morf Stilson's sister. "I don't savvy this set-up—"

The girl put a finger to her lips, cautioning him to silence until they were out of earshot of the stranded stagecoach.

"You will, Cloyd," she whispered. "We've got a spare horse waiting for you back in the brush. Come on."

Fifty yards up the brush-choked defile overlooking the stage road, Thornton found a pair of Turkey Track cowponies hitched to a juniper snag. By the time he and Julie had mounted, the rider behind them pushed through into the opening, his mask pulled down around his throat to reveal the grinning countenance of Morf Stilson.

"Sis and I figgered us cowmen ought to stick together and forget a feud we had no part in startin', Cloyd. Shake on it?"

Thornton hesitated, struck by the historic significance of this moment. Then a wild rush of exultation swept his frame as he leaned from saddle to grip the hand of his erstwhile enemy, putting *finis* to a twenty-year vendetta.

"We couldn't let Ozee Cutler railroad you to the pen, not even if you were a Thornton," Morf grinned. "We're all finished in Horseshoe Basin. Julie and I figgered the three of us might as well roll our tarps and pull out of Texas together."

With the possibility that Sheriff Radlock might hit their trail with the jehu's shotgun, there was no time for further explanations. With Julie leading the way on her calico pegpony, the three pushed on to the head of the defile and lined out along the rocky-toothed backbone of the sunblaze summit.

An hour later and ten miles south of Ocotillo Pass, they crossed the canyon of the Alkali, fording the river at a point where Ozee Cutler's Mexican scraper gangs were supposed to be building a dam which would convert the Basin into a farmer's garden of Eden.

This afternoon, they saw no trace of activity at the damsite. Freso scrapers were unhitched from their teams and there was no trace of any Mexican laborers around their former camp.

"I braced Cutler's job foreman for work on this dam the day before your trial," Morf Stilson remarked. "He told me it was no dice. I reckon I see why now. Cutler don't figger on finishing this dam, once he gets the nesters' money in his pockets. He's already called off construction, it looks like."

Dusk brought them to a remote canyon where a packhorse loaded with provisions was waiting alongside an old prospect hole where a jackleg miner in years past had built and abandoned a rock-and-dobe shack. There was a trickle of water lacing out of the prospect hole, and plenty of grass for the animals.

"I've camped here on hunting trips when I was a kid," Morf explained, as they stripped saddles from their steaming mounts. "Sis and I brought the packhorse here last night, after we'd decided on chousing you off the stage in Ocotillo Pass. If the sheriff should follow our sign here, there's any one of a dozen *barrancas* branching off from here that would take us to Mexico in a day's travel."

Thorton eyed his two benefactors uncertainly. The hard, punishing getaway ride from Ocotillo Pass had given him time to think things out and he had no desire to drag the Stilsons into a life on the dodge.

"I have a hunch Radlock will figure I was rescued by my own Box 36 rannies," Thornton said. "He wouldn't dream that a Stilson would help a Thornton, that's for sure. Come morning, I aim to strike out on my own, Morf. You and Julie should go back to Sixprong like nothing had happened. Radlock could never pin anything on you."

Julie looked up from the task of unpacking cooking utensils from the packsaddle flung by the door of the prospector's hut.

"We aim to head back to town," the girl said. "But we're hoping you'll stay put here in Dutchman's Gulch, Cloyd. After what we saw at Cutler's damsite this morning, Morf and I think that Ozee's got plans to swindle those nesters and skip the country, sooner than we might think."

A grin spread across Thornton's mouth. By her words, Julie had removed all doubt regarding her intentions of favoring Ozee Cutler's ardent courtship.

"I'm game to stay here until the time's ripe to spring a trap on Ozee," Thornton said. "When that time comes, no man has a better right to be in on the kill . . . I figure Ozee Cutler is responsible for bringing hoof and mouth disease into the Basin to wipe out us cattlemen. With your help,

Julie, I believe we can dab our loop on that no-good son—"

CHAPTER FOUR

Cutler's Proposal

MORF STILSON and his sister Julie returned unobtrusively to Sixprong during the night, arriving there simultaneously with the limping sheriff and a footsore Wells-Fargo driver.

Booking rooms at the Trail House hotel, inasmuch as Ozee Cutler had taken possession of the Turkey Track earlier in the week, the two Stilsons emerged next morning to learn that Cloyd Thornton's hunch had been verified.

Sheriff Tom Radlock, in admitting the loss of his penitentiary-bound prisoner, spread the word that in his opinion, Thornton had been rescued by loyal cowhands from the Box 36. In view of the fact that Thornton had paid off his crew and they had already scattered, tracking down the guilty pair would be impossible.

During the week which followed, the sensation died out as the influx of hayshakers gathered in town to buy farm land from Ozee Cutler's syndicate. The wily promoter already had surveyors out on Box 36 range, cutting Thornton's spread into half-section pieces which would be offered for sale to the locust-swarm of sodbusters drawn by a farflung advertising campaign to Horseshoe Basin.

Morf Stilson, using the paltry sum of cash which Cutler had paid him for the disease-ruined Turkey Track spread, bought a half interest in a Sixprong saddleshop and announced that he was settling down as a permanent resident of the cowtown.

Julie, aware of the profitable market in horsehair ropes and headstalls throughout the West, advertised in the Sixprong Weekly *Gazette* that she would open her craft shop in her brother's saddlery and invited orders for her products.

Cloyd Thornton's sensational escape from the law was dimming in the town's memory when Cutler announced that he had purchased the Box 36 from the Stockman's Bank and that Thornton's former spread was now open for sale in small acreages.

Grangers fought among themselves for the privilege of planking down their hard-earned savings to buy what amounted to little more than squares on the syndicate's survey plat of the Box 36. When the first day's sales were finished, Nate Flieschman had deposited nearly a quarter of a million dollars in the vault of the Stockman's Bank.

One of Cutler's main talking points, and the wellspring of the confidence he enjoyed with the grangers, was that his land syndicaté would not get hold of a red penny of their money until the Alkali Dam was finished and a system of irrigation ditches had been dug throughout the Basin to provide each nester with an adequate supply of irrigation water.

"This protects you in case the syndicate is mistaken about the amount of water which our dam will provide," Cutler reassured each prospective buyer. "Your money will remain in trust with Nate Flieschman's bank until your farms are actually producing crops. What could be fairer than that, gentlemen?"

Range-wise cowmen, who had been born and bred in the Basin, watched the land boom progress with misgivings, open in their scorn and pity of the eager grangers who were pouring their savings into Cutler's promotion scheme.

At gaming tables and saloon bars, men who believed that Horseshoe Basin was and always would be cow country got into daily but futile arguments with the Pilgrims, warning them that twenty year's work would be necessary to clear the *brasada* for the plow.

But the grangers were held spellbound by Cutler's promises that the following spring would see Alkali Dam finished and water pouring into the main canals and laterals which his imported Mexican laborers would dig during the coming winter.

"Cutler ain't taking our money direct, is he?" the farmers countered the warnings of skeptical cowmen. "If the water company goes under, we get our money back, with interest. If it succeeds like Cutler is gambling it will, we'll all be rich."

Such was the situation when, the third day after the big sales campaign began. Ozee Cutler posted a bulletin on his office door that not a single acre of Horseshoe Basin land remained unsold.

Cutler sought out Julie Stilson in her

brother's saddle shop that evening, where she was busy combing horsehair to handle her advance orders for fancy ropes and other gear.

"Julie girl," smirked the promoter, "you've put me off long enough. Say the word, and we'll head for El Paso and get a padre to hitch us in double harness. Say the word, and I can give you all a woman's heart could desire. Furs, jewels, travel, a fine home back in New York. Servants, social prestige . . . I'm a rich man, Julie. But wealth is not enough unless a man can share it with the girl of his dreams—"

Julie tugged her hands free of Cutler's grasp.

"You haven't mentioned love in your list of inducements, Mr. Cutler," she parried coyly. "I might be tempted—"

Cutler leaned forward, his breath hot on her face, his eyes glittering avariciously.

"Of course I love you, Julie. I adore you . . . too much to want you to spend your life in this uncurried neck of nowhere. I'm leaving tonight on a business trip to Denver, Julie. I'd like to take you with me. Call it a honeymoon."

The girl laughed to cover the sudden pounding of her heart.

"You are asking me to elope with you—tonight?" she said. "How romantic! But how about the syndicate? How about your pledges to the farmers?"

He waved an impatient hand.

"My lieutenants will handle those details, Julie. Sales promotion is my side of the business, and that's finished, as of today. It's a deal, then? We can slip out of town tonight, be married in El Paso?"

Julie Stilson eyed him coyly.

"How could we leave town," she countered, "without the gossips' tongues wagging? I have my reputation to consider—"

Cutler dropped his voice to a confidential undertone:

"You saddle up a horse this evening and ride out of town as if you're out for a breath of air," he proposed, excitement flushing his thick features. "We can catch the Rainbow Flyer up at Commanche Tanks tomorrow at daylight. This time tomorrow we will be in 'Paso . . . and man and wife. I swear I'll make you a happy bride, Julie—"

Excitement which Cutler mistook for girlish romanticism tinged Julie's cheeks with crimson. Cutler's plan was simple: Julie was to ride north up the section line road and meet him at the Alkali River bridge around midnight, to begin their night ride across the basin to the nearest railroad flag stop.

Leaving the saddle shop at a jaunty strut, Julie's acceptance of his marriage proposal enflaming his blood like rare wine, Ozee Cutler crossed the street to his syndicate office.

Morf Stilson emerged from the rear of the saddle shop in time to see Cutler joined at the syndicate's door by the quarantine officer, Ford Brockway. The two men entered the building together.

"It's come, Morf!" Julie whispered excitedly, clutching her brother's arm. "Just like Cloyd said it would, if we kept our eyes open. Ozee's skipping out of Texas tonight—"

No one in Sixprong saw Morf Stilson saddle up a fast stallion shortly after sunset and ride out of town. He was heading toward Dutchman's Gulch in the Sunblaze foothills, where Cloyd Thornton had his hideout . . .

NIGHT had fallen thick as indigo paint over Horseshoe Basin when Morf Stilson returned to Sixprong, Cloyd Thornton riding at his stirrup.

During the weeks he had remained in hiding at Dutchman's Gulch, the Box 36 fugitive had let his beard grow, so that he bore little resemblance to the man who had stood at the bar of justice in this cowtown three weeks ago.

Reining up in front of Sheriff Tom Radlock's jailhouse, Morf Stilson turned anxiously to the Texan beside him.

"I hope you ain't gambling your freedom on a wild hunch of my sister's, Cloyd. It's entirely possible Cutler is on the level, making a business trip out of town and wanting Julie to go along with him—"

Thornton grinned in the darkness, stepping out of stirrups and adjusting the weight of the Colt .45 at his flank.

"I'll bet my last blue chip that Ozee don't aim to leave town without the nesters' money," Thornton declared. "Wait for me, son—"

Disregarding Morf Stilson's whispered protest, Thornton ducked under the rail fence and walked boldly up the steps of

the sheriff's office, his heart pounding. He opened the door without knocking, stepping into the glare of lamplight there to startle Tom Radlock at his desk, busy checking over a batch of reward posters.

"Thornton!" Radlock choked out, half rising from his spur scuffed chair and then settling back as he found himself staring into the muzzle of the cowman's six-gun. "Why in hell didn't you stay in Chihuahua?"

Thornton grinned behind his scrub of whiskers.

"I ain't been south of the border, sheriff. . . I came back tonight to help you dab your loop on the biggest swindler to hit Texas since the carpetbagger days. Listen to what I got to say, and if I don't make sense, I'll fork over my gun and let you take me to Santa Castro."

. . . When Thornton emerged from the jail office ten minutes later, Sheriff Tom Radlock accompanied him, toting a sawed-off scattergun under his arm.

Morf Stilson joined them at the gate and the three men moved off through the darkness without exchanging a word.

Banker Nate Flieschman's ornate Victorian house at the end of Main Street was their destination. The banker listened in growing dismay to what Cloyd Thornton had to tell him and finally, after a brief argument, blew out his lamp and accompanied the three men out into the night.

The courthouse clock was chiming eleven when they reached the back end of the Stockman's Bank. After a moment's delay while Fleischman fumbled with his keys in the darkness, the rear door opened and admitted the four men into the bank.

"It's unthinkable that my cashier could be bought out by any outlaw!" Fleischman wheezed in the darkness as they groped their way to the marble counter which partitioned off the tellers' cages from the front lobby. "Joe Cramer has worked for me since he was a button. I'd bet my bottom dollar he was trustworthy—"

Cloyd Thornton grunted skeptically at the banker's elbow.

"Then he shouldn't have taken so many drinks in public with Ozee and his syndicate crowd," Thornton said. "He's the only man beside yourself who knows the combination to the vault yonder. You think I'd gamble a stretch in the State Penitentiary on a bluff, Nate? No, I'm right."

MINUTES ticked by, stretched into hours. Midnight brought sounds of revelry from the honkies and deadfalls lining the main street. The four men hidden in the tellers' cages of the bank squirmed in a strained suspense, sweating out their self-imposed vigil.

One o'clock passed, one thirty, one forty-five. Then, as the chiming notes of two came from the courthouse clocktower and hung in undulating reverberation over the town, a rattle of noise sounded at the back door.

In breath-held suspense, the four men inside the bank waited, hearing a surreptitious mutter of voices followed by a thud of tip-toeing boots approaching the black square in the rear wall which marked the bank's huge safety vault.

"I don't need a light, Mister Cutler!" came the tremulous whisper of the bank cashier, Joe Cramer. "I could open this safe with my eyes shut."

The land promoter's throaty chuckle reached the ears of Thornton and the others.

"For a ten-thousand cut, you'd better be able to do a quick job of it, son. I've shaved the time pretty close now if I flag that train at the Tanks . . ."

Tumblers clicked in the massive laminated steel door as Cramer dialed the combination. Then vault swung open and Ozee Cutler groped inside, scratching a match when he was sure the light would be shielded from view of the bank's windows.

The guttering yellow glare widened into vivid flame as the speculator lit the wick of a tallow candle and set it carefully on a steel shelf inside the vault, illuminating the tiers of safety-deposit boxes.

The candlelight silhouetted the two men with Cutler. Joe Cramer, trembling visibly. And Ford Brockway, the quarantine officer whose crews had cremated thousands of head of diseased stock over on the Turkey Track and Box 36 a month ago . . .

"Hold it, all three of you!"

It was Cloyd Thornton's voice which lashed out like a trumpet of doom in the stygian darkness outside the vault. Whirling like puppets yanked by a single wire, Cutler and Brockway and the bank cashier stared through the maw of the open vault

to see Thornton stalking toward them, candlelight winking off the jutting bore of a six-gun held at waist level.

Behind him came the crouched figure of Tom Radlock and Morf Stilson, with the white visage of banker Nate Fleischman in the background.

With a choked oath, Ozee Cutler leaped to put the cashier's skinny form between him and the advancing guns, pawing back the fustian tails of his steelpen coat to clear his own gunbutt.

But Joe Cramer was built of flimsy stuff. With a gagging moan, the cashier slumped over the steel combing of the vault door in a faint, exposing the land shark in the act of whipping his gun from holster.

Flame spat from the bore of Thornton's six-gun, two closely-spaced shots that filled the bank with thunder. Converging slugs hammered Cutler to his knees. The promoter triggered his gun, his slug ricocheting off the steel floor of the vault to whine past the sheriff's head.

In a moment of wild panic, Ford Brockway jerked a gun and attempted to vault through the doorway in a suicidal bid to shoot his way to freedom.

With cold precision, Sheriff Tom Radlock swung his twin-bored buckshot gun and jerked triggers. Brockway's leap was halted by a double charge of Number Four shot at point-blank range. The thunder of the weapon obliterated the sharper report of Morf Stilson's gun as the Turkey Track cowpuncher added a slug to the volley of lead which cut the quarantine man down in mid-leap.

Through fogging layers of gunsmoke, the three outside the vault saw Ozee Cutler pull himself to his knees, blood leaking from the corners of his mouth, his left hand clawing at the twin bullet holes punched through his brocaded waistcoat.

"Cramer . . . double-crossed us—"

Choking on the words, Cutler shoved the muzzle of his fuming gun into Joe Cramer's back and squeezed trigger, driving a bullet through the unconscious man's body.

Too late, Cloyd Thornton's gun chopped down, slamming a hot slug into the promoter's skull. Dead on his feet, Ozee Cutler slumped forward over the body of the cashier he believed responsible for his retribution. A twitch jerked through the man and then he was still . . . damned still.

The cashier was conscious, but life was fast ebbing from the man.

"I want . . . to talk," whispered Cramer. "It's the least . . . I can do . . . to make up for this . . . rotten deal, Nate—"

Sheriff Radlock raced out into the night to fetch the cowtown medico, leaving Fleischman and Thornton and Morf Stilson to hear Cramer's dying confession.

"From the first . . . Cutler knew his land deal . . . wouldn't pay off," Cramer wheezed. "Planned . . . to drive the cattlemen . . . out of the basin. Ford Brockway . . . was his partner . . . on that deal. It was Brockway . . . who fetched hoof and mouth disease into the Basin . . . contaminating waterholes with a dead sheep . . ."

Julie Stilson was with the cowtown doctor and the sheriff when they returned to the bank. All the medico could do was assuage Joe Cramer's death agonies with a merciful syrette of morphine.

"It goes without sayin'," Nate Fleischman told Stilson and Cloyd Thornton, "that Cutler's title to your ranches is null and void. The Stockman's Bank was founded on the prosperity of Basin cattle and Basin cattlemen. My bank stands behind you if you care to import stock to replenish your range, next year when the threat of hoof and mouth is gone, men. I've always claimed that Horseshoe Basin was first and last a cowman's range . . ."

It took three years to prove the accuracy of the banker's prophecy. By then a multitude of disillusioned sodbusters, their money returned to them, had dragged their wagons to climes more favorable to plow and harrow.

Julie and her husband, Cloyd Thornton, made their headquarters at the old Box 36, leaving their partner, Morf Stilson, to make his bachelor quarters in old Colonel Jerrod's rambling Turkey Track ranch house.

But even Morf wouldn't have to envy Cloyd and Julie their husky twin sons for long. Gossip had it in Sixprong that Morf aimed to marry up with the little red-haired schoolmarm who had first come to Sixprong as the daughter of a sodbuster and who, alone of the granger legion, had remained to live out her years in the unfenced, unplowed vistas of a land where cattle was king.

THE END

SAY IT WITH SIXGUNS!

The Loco Kid, greenhorn frontier editor, started his own private war with the kill-quick cattle boss. . . . And the bets were fifty to one he'd sell his next edition in Hell!

By MARVIN J. JONES

The Loco Kid started forward to give the fallen man a taste of his own medicine.

SHERIFF TUCK stood spraddle legged on the sagging porch of his office, his long jaw slacked off as he watched the stranger ride into town. The road that the stranger straddled was a mouse colored bonerack, with a swayed back and skeleton head. The roan plodded up the street dejectedly, but the rider leaned forward in the stirrups as though in the last heat of the Kentucky Derby.

"Whoa!" said the stranger, mildly, as horse and rider neared a point in front of Tuck.

The roan was in the act of carefully

raising his right forefoot to take another step. Upon the command, he carefully replaced the hoof in the exact depression it had left and without changing the position of any other leg, closed his eyes. The stranger patted the roan's neck and painfully clambered from the saddle.

"How do you do?" he said politely to Tuck.

Sheriff Tuck's long jaw chewed thoughtfully and considerately. "I don't know," he admitted finally. "I never give it much thought. Mostly how I please, I guess."

The younger man sighed, took off the brown derby that crowded his ears and wiped his face with a bandana. Then he sighed again.

"The West is a remarkable place," he told Tuck. "Frankly, you have summed the attitude of the inhabitants very accurately. They seem to do just what they feel like doing."

"You agin it?" the sheriff asked.

"In certain of its aspects—yes," the younger man said firmly. "In the last three towns, the citizens felt like running me out of town. And transportation is quite a problem."

There was a little sympathy in Tuck's eyes, but not much.

"But," went on the skinny stranger, "there's a lot of philosophy in what you say."

"What?" asked the sheriff blankly.

"I'm tired of being run out of towns," the stranger explained. "I don't know why I should run, if I don't feel like it."

Sheriff Tuck's tongue made a bulge in his cheek as he looked at the derby hat, the light trousers and yellow shoes.

"No reason in the world," he agreed.

"Well," said the younger man thoughtfully. "I'm tired of running—or riding. I take it that you have no objection to my settling here and making an honest living."

"None whatever," Tuck assured him.

"Thank you," the younger man said solemnly. "My name is Gerald Jefferson Adams. I'm from New York."

"What kind of business you in?" Tuck wanted to know.

The other hesitated. "Well, back East, I played a little baseball. They called me the Loco Kid," he added self-consciously.

"We don't go in much for it here," Tuck told him.

"I'm through with baseball," the Kid assured the other. "I'm on the blacklist. I conked an umpire."

Tuck looked at the younger man's skinny frame. "What with?" he asked finally.

"A baseball," the Kid said. "He was crooked."

"What kind of business did you have in mind, son?" asked the old lawman.

"It doesn't matter. As long as it's honest."

"Name's Tuck," said the sheriff, thrusting out a hand. "We're always glad to welcome an honest citizen. But how come you got run out of them other towns?"

"Well," said the younger man. "I've been thinking it over and I've reached the conclusion that I haven't adapted myself to the ways of the West as well as I might."

The old sheriff wiped a gnarled hand down over his face and looked again at the other man's clothes.

"Maybe," he admitted, "You got something there. Anyway the livery is right up the street and the hotel is over there."

The Loco Kid was staring across the street at a black haired, brown eyed girl of nineteen, who was entering the general store. The girl looked curiously at the two men, flashed a smile to Sheriff Tuck and disappeared in a swirl of white.

"Who's that?" the Kid demanded, his eyes round.

"Sally Grover," Tuck answered shortly. "Her daddy owns the T Bar T."

"She doesn't look like a ranch girl," said the Kid.

"She's staying in town with an aunt," explained the old sheriff and then added stiffly. "And she's a right nice girl."

"She's an angel!" corrected the younger man and went on down the street to the livery, leaving Sheriff Tuck staring after him.

A FEW days later, Sheriff Tuck leaned back in his straight chair and watched a fly circle the battered and scarred surface of his old desk. He was so absorbed in the fly's antics that he failed to hear Sally Grover's light steps as she entered his office. Suddenly, she stood at his desk and the chair legs slammed against the floor as Tuck came to his feet.

"Howdy, Miss Sally," he said humbly, a pleased glow smoothing out the lines in

his face. Sally Grover's eyes had a distant, dreamy look.

"Hello, Tuck," she said absently and then sighed. "Isn't he wonderful?"

"Huh?" Tuck said, startled.

"Mr. Adams," explained the girl. "The stranger."

"Oh," said Tuck, his face clearing. "The Loco Kid." Then he frowned. "He ain't a bad looking kid," he added, watching Sally's face.

"He's handsome!" Sally said positively.

The sheriff stared at her, amazement on his face.

"Isn't it wonderful he's decided to stay?" Sally asked.

Sheriff Tuck cleared his throat uneasily, his keen, old eyes searching the girl's face.

"Why, I hadn't give it much thought," he admitted warily.

"Well, it is!" Sally said emphatically. "Without an able leader and clearly defined program for civic improvement, the railroad might never come through here. You never can tell."

"Railroad!" said Tuck. "What railroad?"

"You don't understand!" the girl accused.

"No ma'am," Tuck admitted humbly.

"Mr. Adams has taken the interests of this town to his heart," explained Sally.

"Sounds like it's gone to his head!" the sheriff muttered, his face darkening. "And yours."

"He's going to arouse the people to the need of concerted action," Sally said haughtily.

"It's happened in a couple of other towns already," Tuck said grimacing.

The girl ignored him, her eyes fixed glowingly on the wall behind Tuck's desk. "You can't hold back progress," she intoned. "The West is changing. The land awaits the plow."

The sheriff looked at the wall, as though he half expected it to be written there, then the impact of Sally's words struck him. "What!" he roared, turning. "You mean that locoed young squirt wants to bring nesters in here?"

"Farmers," Sally corrected icily. "The land around here is ideal for farming. It's being wasted as rangeland."

"And I can just see him telling people about it—and them listening!" Tuck put in sardonically. "The danged fool!"

"It'll be a fight," admitted the girl, "But he is already armed with the world's most formidable weapon."

"Huh?" said Tuck again.

"He bought out Jim Huddle," said Sally.

"He—he bought Jim Huddle's paper!"

"Yes," said Sally.

Tuck stared at her for a moment and then sank down in his chair, his gaunt shoulders shuddering with silent laughter.

"And what's so funny about that?" demanded the girl.

"Nothing," the lawman said finally, when he was able to speak. "Only it was your Daddy and King Lanahan who put the squeeze on Jim Huddle to get out of town."

"Why?" asked Sally, bewildered.

"Well," the old lawman said, his shoulders shaking again. "It seems he wrote an article they didn't like. Something about how suitable this land would be for farming."

"Oh!" said Sally, a startled look of apprehension coming into her face. Then she set her lips. "I'll win dad over!" she said firmly.

"And who's going to win King Lanahan over?" Tuck reminded her gently.

"Pooh!" Sally said scornfully. "Who's afraid of King Lanahan?"

"Everybody," Tuck said grimly.

A trace of worry came into the girl's face. She stared out of the window. Then she clutched the sill, her shoulders stiffening. Sheriff Tuck looked out the window, too. A low growl came from his throat. King Lanahan had come out of the Big Bar Saloon and his feet were carrying him unerringly toward the false fronted building that housed the newspaper office. The blood had drained from Sally's face. Without a word, she turned from the window and hurried out the door. Tuck growled in his throat again, stuffed his hat on his head and followed her.

KING LANAHAN was standing in the door of the newspaper office, searching out the interior. As Sheriff Tuck and Sally crossed the street, the Loco Kid came out, wiping ink stained hands on a rag.

"Good afternoon, sir," he said to the burly rancher.

King Lanahan stared at the kid, his smooth, fleshy face puzzled, and big body

slouched carelessly. His eyes were ugly.

"Where's Jim Huddle?" he demanded gruffly.

"Why, he said something about catching the two o'clock stage," the Loco Kid told him. "His mother is sick back East and he was in a big hurry. You a friend of his?"

"I'm King Lanahan," the big man said.

The Loco Kid beamed and thrust out his hand. King Lanahan hesitated and then met the gesture. The Kid wrung the big hand cordially.

"He left a message for you, Mr. Lanahan," the Kid explained. "He said to tell you he was mighty sorry he missed telling you goodby. He said he wasn't going to the place you expected him to, but he'd see you there sometime. I'm taking over the paper, Mr. Lanahan and I'm continuing Mr. Huddle's policy. His friends are my friends. Can I do anything for you?"

"Get out of town," King Lanahan said coldly.

"What?" said the Kid, his jaw dropping.

"Get out of town," repeated the big rancher.

"I just got here," protested the other.

Lanahan reached out one big hand and took the Loco Kid by the front of the vest. He shook the smaller man as a mastiff would shake a terrier. Then he set him down and stepped back.

"Get out of town," he said for the third time.

The Loco Kid took a deep breath. His face was pale and his eyes were blazing. He stuffed his shirt down in his trousers and smoothed his vest.

"Mr. Lanahan," he said reproachfully. "You drove me to this."

"Drove you to what?" King snarled contemptuously.

The Kid's lips thinned out into a line. He doubled over suddenly, hunching his head between his shoulders.

"Golly!" exclaimed Sheriff Tuck.

With a bound like a kangaroo, the Kid buried his head in the pit of King Lanahan's stomach. The big rancher flew ten feet and rolled ten more. When he stopped rolling, he lay still.

The Loco Kid dusted off his hands as though the problem was permanently settled and went back inside his office.

"Now he's done it!" groaned Tuck.

"I told you he was wonderful!" Sally Grover exclaimed and then the blood left her face again.

King Lanahan was getting to his feet, his face a sickly green. His body trembled from the effect of the blow, but his big head swung slowly from side to side, until his eyes searched out the gun that had spun from its holster. He staggered over and picked it up. Dangling it at his side, his face twisted with pain and rage, he started for the door of the office.

Sheriff Tuck drew a deep breath and his old .45 came out of its worn holster with a swish.

"King!" he warned grimly.

Lanahan stopped and looked at the old sheriff, the Colt loose in his hand and his eyes bloodshot slits.

"You horning in?" he asked the lawman, his voice deadly.

"Just don't want you getting yourself in a mess of trouble," Tuck said softly. "The boy ain't got a gun."

The big rancher stared at the long forty-five and then raised his eyes.

"You got any objections to me stomping him to death?" he asked the lawman.

"That's a mite different," Tuck said.

King Lanahan tossed his Colt to one side.

"Get him out here," he said grimly.

Sheriff Tuck holstered his .45 and turned to the office. Sally Grover caught his arm.

"That ain't fair!" she protested hotly. "He's only half as big!"

The old lawman gently freed his arm. "He picked himself a man sized job when he came into town," he told the girl. "If he ain't got what it takes, he might as well find it out now." He stamped down the boardwalk and into the newspaper office.

THE Loco Kid was bent over his press, forehead furrowed.

"Son," Tuck said gruffly. "King Lanahan ain't satified. Maybe you'd better step outside and get it settled."

"Gosh," said the Kid, reluctantly wiping his hands again and coming from behind the counter. "I got a paper to get out."

The old sheriff looked at the Kid's skinny arms and sighed. "It won't take long." he assured him. The hand that he dropped on the younger man's shoulder was almost fatherly as they went back out on the street.

The Loco Kid's eyes were cold as he

walked up to King Lanahan and his voice was brusque and businesslike.

"Mr. Lanahan," he stated, as he stopped in front of the big man. "It's becoming obvious that you hold a grudge against this paper's past policy and the reason you ordered me out of town was because you were afraid I would continue it. I want you to know that I'm in perfect accord with Mr. Huddle's policy and shall strive to emulate his example—except for leaving town."

"All of which means?" sneered the big rancher.

"I'm not in sympathy with certain, selfish individual interests of this community and I shall deal sternly with any attempt to intimidate me," the Kid said firmly.

King Lanahan carefully measured the distance between himself and the young editor and launched a wicked right at the Kid's out thrust jaw. The smaller man moved his head to one side and a pipe stemmed arm hooked a sharp left to the rancher's neck. King Lanahan staggered and choked, his beefy face startled. He backed away a step and circled, eyes wary and astonished.

The Kid jogged forward easily, left foot ahead and then jogged back. King Lanahan threw a hard right that fanned the younger man's jaw. As it swept past, the Kid jogged in again. His left rapped out with a series of savage jabs that took the bigger man back five feet, his head bobbing with the blows. The rancher's heel struck the board walk and he sprawled. The Kid stepped back and dropped his arms, waiting for the other to regain his feet. Sheriff Tuck wiped his hand down over his leathery face and groaned.

King Lanahan scrambled to his feet, but one leg buckled under him and his face contorted with pain. The Kid's mouth went back to its good natured lines. He stepped forward and offered the rancher a hand.

"Most unfortunate, sir," he murmured courteously.

Sheriff Tuck groaned again. As the Kid bent forward, King Lanahan's bad leg suddenly turned into a good leg. The big rancher straightened from his crouch and he drove a crashing right to the Kid's jaw that tumbled the younger man over and over in the street. Lanahan cursed with triumph, bounded forward and jumped into the air, his high-heeled boots driving for the Kid's face.

The Loco Kid rolled out from under the driving boots, but his eyes were dazed as he got to his feet. King Lanahan rushed him and the editor retreated, his feet dragging and shuffling in the dust, his thin arms fencing off the blows battering at his face.

"Jerry!" Sally cried out, her voice half a sob and half a moan, as the Kid went down again. "Do something!" she said furiously to the old sheriff and she tugged at the butt of Tuck's big gun.

The lawman's hand closed down on her wrist. "Wait a minute," he told the girl. There was something in his voice that made the girl turn again to the battling men. The Kid was avoiding the driving boots with ease.

"Stalling!" Tuck muttered, respect in his voice.

The Loco Kid *was* stalling. He caught one of the boots that lashed at his face and gave it a quick flip. King Lanahan crashed to the ground with a force that drove the breath from his big body. When the rancher got to his feet, the smaller man was up too and the Kid's heels no longer dragged the dust. He jogged in again, hesitated, but didn't jog back out. Lanahan thought he recognized the feint and waited. He waited too long. The Kid's pause was a deceptive one. His left rapped out to the big man's stomach, rapped out again and cut the rancher's twisted lips. He let a wild right coast by and landed another solid left to Lanahan's neck.

King's heavy boots churned the dust as he retreated from the punishing blows. The Loco Kid jogged in, paused, jogged out. Lanahan, his face bloody and bewildered, rose to the bait. He threw a right, a left and another right. As the last right fanned by, the Kid jogged in again, hashing at the big man's face.

King Lanahan's face was a mass of welts and cuts. Blood streamed down from his eyebrows, nose and lips. New cuts opened where the skin stretched tight over his cheekbones. The Kid's face was pale, there was a livid bruise on his jaw and one eye was closing, but his pipestem arms hammered and rapped at the other's face.

Lanahan's thick legs began to quiver, he

held his fists lower and his blows were slower. The Kid dropped down off the balls of his feet and came in flatfooted. He drove a left to the rancher's mouth and then shuffled in fast, his feet still flat. His right shoulder hunched forward as he swung the upper part of his body to the left. His right arm was hooked and trailing. As his shoulder moved past the big man's face, his fist turned under and the knuckles thudded solidly against the beefy jaw. King Lanahan's eyeballs rolled up and left staring white slits. Every muscle in his big body let go as he went down.

The Loco Kid stared down at the unconscious man for moments and then turned wearily back to his office, his feet dragging through the dust. Sally Grover hurried after him. Sheriff Tuck watched the two of them as they disappeared through the door and then went back to his own office, shaking his head.

THE next afternoon, Sally Grover was back in Tuck's office, her eyes haunted and worried.

"Tuck," she told the old lawman. "You have to do something."

"About what?" Tuck wanted to know.

"You've got to keep King from killing Jerry—Mr. Adams."

"Shucks," soothed Tuck. "You don't have to worry about that. Lanahan wouldn't gun down an unarmed man—not unless he was some riled—like yesterday. As long as the Loco Kid don't pack a gun, he's got King whipped."

"But he bought a gun!" wailed Sally. "And he's going to carry it."

Sheriff Tuck let his chair legs down easy. "Why, that young, damned fool!" he exploded.

"He's not either!" Sally protested fiercely. "He's just too brave, that's all!"

"Too dumb," Tuck muttered under his breath, but aloud he said. "I'll go see him."

He found the Loco Kid in the newspaper office, cartridge belt wrapped around his waist and gingerly examining a new .45. Tuck ducked back from the door, as the muzzle swung in his direction.

"Come in!" the Loco Kid called cheerfully.

"Not by a damned sight!" Tuck growled. "Put that thing down somewhere!"

The Kid dutifully holstered the heavy weapon and Tuck, peering cautiously around the door, came in.

"You going to carry that?" the lawman asked.

"It's the custom," the Loco Kid assured him. "From now on I'm paying strict attention to the customs of the West."

"From now on—ain't going to be long," Tuck said glumly. "You figger you're a gunman now?"

The Loco Kid frowned. "Well," he admitted. "I'm not exactly in favor of promiscuous gunplay, but I don't want people to think I've an aversion to it."

"You got any aversion to being buried?" Tuck demanded.

"Not if I'm dead," the younger man assured him solemnly.

"You'll be dead enough," Tuck said, sighing. "Did it ever occur to you that you might be called upon to drag that sixgun out of that holster?"

The Kid frowned again. "Well," he said, his voice puzzled, "It seems easy enough. It comes out just like it goes in, doesn't it?" With the words, his right hand dipped easily and the heavy sixgun appeared in his hand.

Sheriff Tuck staggered, his jaw dropping.

"Can you d-d-do that again?" he demanded.

The Kid dropped the gun back in its holster and drew again, with the same magic, dipping ease.

"Where did you learn to draw like that?" Tuck demanded hoarsely.

The Loco Kid looked bewildered. "Why," he said hesitantly, examining the holster. "It's got to come out that way, doesn't it?"

Sheriff Tuck sat down heavily in the only chair and pushed his hat back. He looked a little bewildered too.

"Is anything the matter?" the Kid wanted to know, staring anxiously at Tuck's face.

"Not at all. Not at all," the old lawman mumbled. He wiped his hand down over his face and got up from the chair. "Just getting old, I guess. Mind ain't what it used to be. I reckon I'll be getting along."

"Do you know where I can get a shoulder holster?" the Loco Kid asked suddenly, as Tuck was at the door.

The old lawman reeled as he turned around.

"What?" he asked faintly.

"A shoulder holster," repeated the young editor. "I understand there are two types of holsters—this kind and a shoulder holster. This one seems a bit awkward."

"Awkward?" echoed Tuck, holding on to the edge of the doorway.

"Yes," said the Kid. "I'd like something I could get my gun out of fast—in case of emergency, you know."

The old sheriff eyed the younger man for a long time. "Don't know as I've seen one around," he said finally.

"Well," said the Kid, disappointment in his voice. "I guess I can fix this one up so it's handier."

Sheriff Tuck turned, still holding on to the door and reeled out. Once outside, he drew a deep breath, frowned blackly and stamped back to his office.

"Well?" Sally Grover wanted to know, when the old lawdog had hung up his hat and slumped into his chair.

"You ain't got a thing to worry about," Tuck said sourly, "Not a thing."

Sally Grover came around the desk, bent over and quickly planted a kiss on one leathery cheek.

"You're a dear!" she said, blushed and ran out.

Tuck had stiffened in his chair like a ramrod. He raised one hand and gently touched his cheek with the tips of his fingers. Sighing, he sat glumly in his chair, glaring through the window at the false front of the newspaper office down the street.

He was still there, an hour later, when Sam Hitch, the hardware man, burst through the door. Sam was a short, chubby man and now, his plump face quivered with agitation.

"Tuck!" he gasped. "You got to do something!"

"Now what?" asked the old sheriff, grumpily.

"King Lanahan and this new editor are going to shoot it out in front of the Big Bar Saloon. King sent him a challenge and the young fool accepted!"

"I wouldn't worry about it," Tuck counselled.

"Not worry about it!" groaned Sam. "Why that young fellow is the best thing that ever happened to this town. He sized up the situation as soon as he arrived. This is farming country. Why, this would be the biggest and richest city in the state, if he could put through his ideas. Don't worry? Why, he hasn't got a chance against King Lanahan!"

Sheriff Tuck swung his feet to the floor so hard, the dust spurted from the cracks.

"Listen, Sam," he said, his voice harsh. "This so-called Gerald Jefferson Adams, alias the Loco Kid, is pulling the wool over your eyes. He's a born gunman. I don't know why he's putting on the act he is, but I spect it's so folks will take him for an easy mark and get careless. I've seen him handle a six-pistol and there ain't a man in the country that can match his draw."

"B-b-but—," began the hardware man, his face bewildered.

"But nothing!" snapped the old lawman. "He's just plain tricky!"

Sam Hitch was taken aback at Tuck's vehemence. He mopped his florid face and sighed.

"If you say so, Tuck," he said finally. "But have you seen that rig he's wearing?"

"Rig?" questioned the lawman blankly.

"Rig!" stated the hardware man postively. "It's tthe damndest thing I've ever seen. He calls it a shoulder holster. It should be called a back holster. It hangs down his back."

Sheriff Tuck closed his mouth with an effort.

"Hangs down his back?" he asked, awe in his voice.

Sam Hitch nodded. "Another thing," he told Tuck. "When he bought the gun, I didn't sell him any cartridges."

"How come?" Tuck wanted to know.

"Well," Sam said lamely. "He didn't ask for any and he was so plumb awkward handling that Colt-gun, I-I just thought it wouldn't be a bad idea if he got them somewhere else. I didn't want him loading it around me."

"That don't mean nothing," protested Tuck, but he sounded worried. "He's got some now—that's a cinch."

The hardware man mopped his plump face again. "I ain't too sure, Tuck," he said mournfully. "I been checking around town and I can't find anyplace where he got cartridges or even asked about them. Do—do you think he knows he needs any?"

"Good Lord!" said Tuck, sitting up in his chair. "Didn't you ask him—after you

went around town?" Sam looked scared.

"Dammit!" wailed Sam. "I don't want to be in town when he's packing a loaded gun.

"I know what you mean," Tuck admitted, cursing under his breath.

"I'd just as soon give a pet monkey a loaded shotgun," Sam went on. "The thing to do is to keep the fight from coming off."

"When is it coming off?" Tuck demanded.

Sam Hitch looked at his watch and his face turned pale. "Now!" he said groaning.

"Holy cow!" exclaimed Tuck and grabbed for his hat.

When they hit the board sidewalk, the old lawman let out an even more potent curse, stifling it just in time. King Lanahan was already out in the street, coming toward them, stifflegged, his head lowered and hand brushing the butt of his sixgun. Going down to meet him was the skinny figure of the Loco Kid, walking with an easy, careless stride, his holster hanging down his back and the butt of the big gun sticking awkwardly above his right shoulder. What made the sheriff choke off the curse was Sally Grover's anxious hand on his arm.

"Are you sure everything is all right?" she demanded of Tuck. "He seems confident, but I'm worried."

"*You're* worried!" exploded Tuck and ran off down the board walk at a run.

As he came pounding up to the saloon, he dropped his hand on the butt of his sixgun. When he did, two of King Lanahan's rannys shoved a pair of Colt guns in his face.

"Take it easy, Sheriff!" admonished one gently. "The boss don't want no interference."

"I'll throw you both in jail and hang your boss!" Tuck raged, drawing up short.

"Maybe—later," the puncher said respectfully. "But I don't see why. You can stand by and see that it's an even break," he added.

"An even break!" howled Tuck. "Why that young squirt ain't even got bullets in that gun he's packing—probably," he added for the sake of honesty.

The two punchers gaped at the old lawdog and then grinned and winked.

"You wouldn't try to kid us, would you, Sheriff?" the second one said.

OUT in the center of the street, King Lanahan went for his gun. Sheriff Tuck groaned wretchedly.

The Kid was standing almost carelessly, his left foot forward. When the big rancher started his draw, the Kid's hand flashed up to the black butt of his own .45. At the same time, his left foot slid even further forward. His hand blurred as he plucked the gun from the holster and with a smooth, continuing motion, hurled it straight at Lanahan's face.

King Lanahan's thumb was slipping off the hammer, when he saw the blur of the gun coming at him. The big Colt bucked and flamed in his hand, but he was already trying to duck. The Loco Kid's sleeve jerked as the rancher's slug tugged at it and a split second later, the Kid's sixgun thudded sickeningly against Lanahan's forehead. The rancher went down.

The Loco Kid came trotting over to the fallen man. He bent over, felt for a pulse and then stood straight, sighing with relief.

"I'm glad I didn't kill him," he said solemnly. "I'm sure he'll change his attitude about the farms, in time."

"There ain't no doubt in my mind," Tuck agreed, swallowing. He picked up the Kid's gun, looked at the cylinder and handed it to the boy.

"Thanks," said the Loco Kid.

"Listen," said Tuck. "That gun ain't loaded."

"I know it," the Kid said calmly. "I'm not that dumb."

The old lawdog's jaw was loose. "You mean you figger on carrying it that way?"

Tuck stared at the young editor bewilderedly.

"Maybe you'd teach me how to shoot," said the Kid. "I'd like to learn how to do the things they do here in the West. It would put me on more of an equal footing. You see," he added dropping his voice and flushing as Sally Grover came running up, "I'd sure like to settle down here and get married," he finished hurriedly.

"Well," said Sheriff Tuck musingly, as he watched the two rannys carry their boss into the Big Bar Saloon. "Damned if I know who'd stand in your way."

SECOND-STRING HEROES

THEIR SADDLES EMPTY, THEIR GUNS AND LAUGHTER STILLED,
BUT THE WEST THEY BUILT LIVES ON.

by **ROBBINS AND WAGGENER**

J. Howard Brown

The White House career of J. Howard Brown, personal barber to President Rutherford Hayes, ended suddenly when he was revealed to have juggled his expense account to the tune of several hundred dollars of the nation's money. Embarrassed, his family made good the loss and put him firmly aboard a westbound train, from which he finally descended at Laso, Arizona, in 1880.

There, he went back into business, and soon dandies were riding in from four counties for a Brown-styled haircut and shave. One day a customer badly in need of a pair of scissors walked into the deserted shop and the barber recognized, with a start, the hairy features of "Grizzly Joe" Mason, a murderous outlaw supposed to be safely in the town jail. "Cut it all off!" snapped the killer, waving a gun and sliding into the chair. "And don't get behind me!"

Longingly, Brown thumbed the keen edge of his razor, then shook his head and went to work. Soon, shaved, trimmed and beardless, the outlaw looked like an entirely different man. Brown's eye suddenly fell on a bottle of hair oil that was shoved far back on a shelf. He seized it and sprinkled its contents liberally over the bandit's freshly clipped head. Mason was pleased. He smiled, handed the barber five dollars, and departed.

The sheriff listened gloomily to Brown's excited story. "Now he's gone for sure," the lawman muttered. "He'll hide out today, be gone by night!" "Gone?" Brown echoed. "Why, I can find him in five minutes. Smell!" The sheriff sniffed. Sure enough, the hearty fragrance of hair oil laid a trail through town plainer than a county road. "Choose yer weapons!" the barber chuckled, brandishing his razor. A few minutes later, the quick-thinking barber lead the astounded sheriff to the hiding place of the vicious but vain outlaw and, together, they forced his surrender.

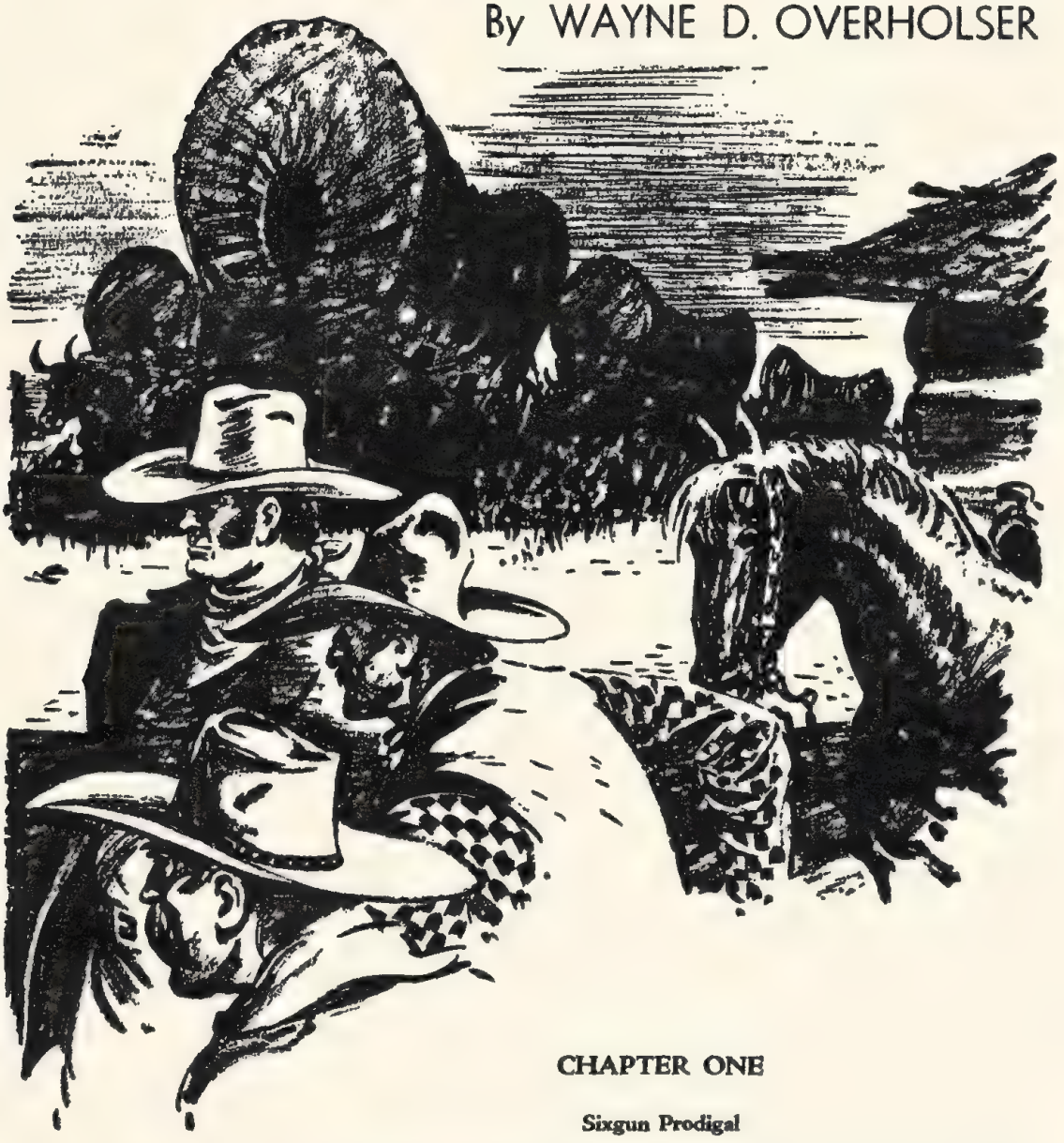
• • Jubilee Valley's

When Dane Rupert promised those land-hungry sodbusters that he would lead them across the blood-won range of his cattle-baron father, he knew he would never go home. For his father promised he'd climb up those nesters' craws to see that they got a free ride to hell—with Dane the first to shake hands with the Devil!

Quick Death Combine

Hell-Roaring Saga of the Last Frontier!

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER



CHAPTER ONE

Sixgun Prodigal

THERE had been a gulf between Dane Rupert and his father as long as he could remember, a gulf that had widened with the years. Jed Rupert, self-made baron of Jubilee Valley, was rich in land and cattle and money, but desperately poor in the intangibles that make life worthwhile. He had gained his wealth by breaking men the way he broke horses. That was the trouble between him and Dane. He had smashed other men with fist, quirt and gun; he could not break his

own son. And so the breach widened.

There had been little happiness for Dane in the big ranchhouse or stone office building since his mother had died six years before. Whatever elements of human mercy that had been in Jed Rupert died with his wife, so Dane had grown accustomed to spending his time riding the range, accompanying the supply train to The Dalles and back, or helping trail a herd to the railroad.

Dane had expected the final rupture between him and his father every time he returned home, but their differences had never come quite to that point. Now, with the lights of the ranchhouse pinpoints ahead, Dane wondered if this would be the time. He searched himself for his real reason in staying. It wasn't love for his father. It wasn't fear of the future, for Dane, a good man with horse and rope and gun, could make his way anywhere.

Nor was he worried about his father disinheriting him. Jed had no other living relative. Besides, it wasn't important. But there was one other bond, the memory of his mother and the things she had believed in, a gossamer bond as strong as life, a bond that had given Dane a dream.

It was ten o'clock when Dane put his horse away and turned wearily toward the square stone building that was his father's office. In a way, it was symbolic of Jed Rupert's character and accomplishments. Jed had built it twenty years ago when he'd come north from California with a herd and band of vaqueros. Pine lumber hauled from the Blue Mountains was good enough for the sprawling ranchhouse, but the office must be built of stone, the one door a thick metal one with a heavy iron bar that would hold against a battering ram wielded by an army.

"I'm staking out an empire," Jed had proudly told his wife and five-year old son. "By the grace of the state and the federal government, I'll have a patent for one hundred thousand acres of swamp land, and I'll never give up the government land around Thunder Springs to a bunch of clodbusters."

So the building was made of stone, but Dane never knew why it was built to look like an old-fashioned blockhouse. If Jed Rupert had been another man, Dane would have said it was fear of the Piutes, but Jed feared Indians no more than other men.

JED stood in the office door, a mountain of a man balanced on legs as thick as the trunks of pines. He called, "That you, Dane?"

"Yes."

"Come here."

It was an order given in the same tone Jed would have used on the chore boy. As long as he stayed on Rocking R, Dane thought bitterly, he'd be ordered in that same tone.

"You're late," Jed said reprimandingly. "I expected you three days ago." He moved to his reinforced swivel chair and sat down behind the battered desk that had come north in a covered wagon from California. "What held you up?"

"Nothing." Dane unbuckled his money belt and dropped it on the desk. "I stayed with the outfit till it got to Canyon City. I figgered they could get along without me the rest of the way."

Jed stroked his blunt chin, thick fingers tapping the money belt. For the first time Dane sensed that his father knew fear.

"The herd left three days ago," Jed said. "I reckon you can catch it on Iron Creek."

"Short handed?"

"Hell no. Somebody's got to bring the dinero back."

It was the one tribute Jed paid his son. He suspected the honesty of every other man who worked for him, even his foreman, Chuck Carradine.

Nodding, Dane turned to the door, bone weary from the long trip to The Dalles and back. He wanted to sleep twenty-four hours in bed, to fill up on Chang's cooking, but a man didn't argue when he worked for Jed Rupert.

"Dane."

Dane swung back to face his father. The blunt fingers were tapping a faster rhythm now, the shirt front pulled tightly across his great chest was rising and falling with his breathing.

"You've never killed a man, have you?"

"No."

Jed pressed his big hands palm down against the desk and hoisted himself to his feet. He turned his hands over and looked at them. Then he lifted his eyes to Dane.

"When I came here I did my own killing. The first time I saw this valley I told myself it was going to be mine. I had a son and later maybe I'd have a grandson

who'd hold what I'd taken and built up."

A sickness crawled into Dane's stomach. He stood a head taller than his father, slender like his mother except that he had the pinched-in-the-middle, wide-shouldered appearance that hard riding gives a man. He had his mother's steady gray eyes and, like she had been, he was soft-spoken and easy-going to a point. But with his mother's gentleness he had Jed's blunt jaw and granite stubbornness that gave nothing beyond that point.

"I'm not a killer," Dane said.

Jed's jaw muscles knotted. "Killing is like bringing money home. It ain't safe to hire it done. I've told you a hundred times I built an empire that'll last forever. In my day it was the Piutes and the rustlers. Now it's the settlers. They're coming in like a plague of locusts because Pete Larkin keeps advertising in Middle West farm papers. You'll have to kill Larkin."

"Killing Larkin won't help. You might as well try to stop time."

Jed's meaty lips flattened against wide teeth. "Killing him will stop 'em all right. They've got to have him to locate 'em. He's got the other spots around here filled so now he figures on bringing 'em onto our range. I told him and Smoky Thoms to leave the country. They laughed at me." His eyes were live smoldering coals. "I won't overlook that. You take care of 'em when you get back from Ontario."

"I'm not a killer," Dane said again.

"You're fast enough with a gun. You afraid?"

"You can think that if you want to," Dane said sourly, and wheeled out of the office.

Dane found something in the kitchen to eat, but he wasn't as hungry as he thought he'd be, nor was he sleepy when he crawled into bed.

Dimly aware of the dismal creaks of the ranchhouse as it shuddered in the night wind, Dane thought about his reason for staying. He remembered how his mother had grown old before she'd reached middle life. He had not understood it when he'd seen it as a boy, but he did now. She had carried Jed Rupert's ruthless actions in her conscience, knowing how wrong they were and still helpless to avert them. She had watched her son grow up, listened with him to Jed's boasting, but only once had she talked to Dane about her own feelings.

It was a week before she had died, and she had known that life was almost gone for her. There were just the two of them in the big bedroom in the front of the house. From the window she could see the hay lands that stretched southward almost to Thunder Springs.

"Power and money go together," she had said, a bony hand closing over Dane's. "Your father has made his money in the wrong way and he's used his power wrong. Someday all this will be yours. I want you to use your power and money in a different way than he has, Dane. This valley needs churches and schools-and a railroad. And it needs people. Help them, Dane."

That had been his real reason for staying. That was how the dream had been born. He hadn't promised, but the tie had been as binding as a promise. Now he had to break it, but he knew it was what his mother would have wanted him to do. He had forced himself to take his father's orders and curses, to listen to his boastings,

Dane was finished on Rocking R. This was the break he had been expecting. He'd bring the money back from Ontario. Then he'd ride out of the valley. When a man worked for Jed Rupert, there were only two choices on a question like this; he obeyed or he cleared out.

but he couldn't callously kill a man simply because Jed Rupert demanded it.

Once the decision was made, Dane slept, but he was up at dawn. He ate breakfast by lamplight in the kitchen, Chang fussing over him much as his mother had done when he was a boy.

Dane roped and saddled a mount, and stepping up, rode past the row of poplars in front of the house. He was almost at the end of them before he saw his father standing there. Jed motioned for him to stop. Reining up, Dane looked down at the wide stubborn face, and was surprised at the way his father had aged.

"You've always had too many of your mother's damned fool notions about being soft and helping other folks out," Jed rumbled. "Time you were getting over 'em. You've got to fight for what's yours and keep fighting." He swung his great hand away from his body in an inclusive gesture. "The day I die the whole kit and kaboodle goes to you, the best damn spread

in the state. Don't throw it away because a yellow dog like Pete Larkin and a killing son like Smoky Thoms want to fill their pockets with locating fees."

"I reckon Larkin and Thoms are crooks," Dane said coldly, "but maybe they're doing a good thing helping folks get settled."

"Why, you damned fool," Jed bellowed. "Once you let nesters through our fence, you might as well give 'em everything."

"Keeping 'em off patented land is one thing. Killing them to keep 'em from settling on the public domain is something else."

Dane rode away without a backward glance. Jed Rupert stood staring after him, a thick hand spread against a poplar trunk. He muttered, "He's your kid, Martha." Gray of face, he turned into the house.

DANE rode hard that day, following the route the herd had taken through the Iron Buttes, and coming near sundown to Iron Creek and the Iron Buttes post office and store. The cattle had been thrown across the stream to graze, and judging by the number of horses racked in front of the store, most of the crew was inside.

Dismounting, Dane stepped into the store. The foreman, Chuck Carradine, and the bulk of the Rocking R riders were bellied up against the pine bar that ran along the west side of the room. They turned when Dane came in and yelled their greetings.

"Christmas is coming," Carradine jeered amiably, "and Dane finally gets here, too. Come on out and cut the dust out o' your throat, son."

There was something in Dane's throat, but it wasn't dust. They were good men, these Rocking R boys. Some of them, including Carradine, had come up the trail from California with Jed Rupert, had looked out across Jubilee valley from the rimrock when it was an uninhabited sea of grass dotted by a dozen lakes. They'd fight for Rocking R with typical cowboy loyalty, but there wasn't a professional gunslinger in the lot.

"I'll do my own gunfighting," Jed had said. "I hire men to handle cattle."

Dane had his drink, and Carradine, who knew him well, sensed there was something wrong, but he didn't put the question until he drifted outside with Dane. Then he asked bluntly, "You look like a bull stepped on your toe. What's biting you?"

Dane told him, rolling a smoke and lighting it and not looking at the chunky ramrod's face. "I guess you know me and the old man feel about each other," Dane finished. "It ain't that I'm a nester lover, but Dad has got a chunk of public domain fenced off and sooner or later he'll lose it. Someday the law will get around to taking care of Rocking R. I think that day is getting close."

"We can smoke down a bunch of grangers between now and then," Carradine said darkly.

"That ain't the point."

"Yeah, I don't reckon I could gun down a man just because the boss wanted him out of the way, even a polecat like Larkin." Carradine grinned sourly. "But if you slope out, Jed won't have nobody to tote the dinero home."

It was a sore point that had long rankled in Chuck Carradine. Dane flipped his cigarette stub over the tie rail. "I guess he'll . . ." Then Dane stopped, for he had lifted his gaze to the road that followed the south bank of the creek, and what he saw brought a sharp exclamation from him. "Take a look, Chuck."

Carradine looked and swore. A wagon train had appeared around a bend in the road. There were five of the white tops. Then six and seven. Still they came.

"The grasshoppers and the drouth must have chased the rest of Kansas across the Rockies," Carradine muttered. "Another one of Larkin's jobs."

The rest of the crew drifted out, and looked and cursed, and stood in silence while the sun dropped behind the Iron Buttes. The train curled into a circle in the flat below the store. Men unhitched and the smoke from cooking fires lifted skyward. Then three riders came through a gap in the wagons and rode directly toward the store.

Carradine shot a glance at Dane. "Talking about having public domain fenced is one thing," he murmured. "Seeing your spread busted up is something else. This outfit will either settle on our range or go plumb on to the Deschutes."

Dane nodded. The three riders were close enough now for him to make them out. He saw in surprise that the middle one was a

girl, but she was no ordinary nester girl in calico dress and sunbonnet. She wore a man's shirt and levis and a Stetson that dangled behind her head from a chin strap. She sat her saddle gracefully and well as only one who had ridden much can.

The man who rode on the right side of the girl was young, in his early twenties, Dane guessed, with a bold handsome face lighted by the greenest hardest eyes Dane had ever seen. He carried two guns, and when he stepped down Dane saw that they were thonged low as a professional gunslinger would have them.

The other was middle-aged with mutton chop whiskers and brown eyes that fixed on Dane in a level scrutiny. He, too, dismounted, only the girl remaining in the saddle. Dane, not wanting to stare, found his eyes returning to her as if drawn there by a power outside himself.

The girl was about twenty, small and perfectly molded, with blue-black eyes and reddish-brown hair that held a wild curly wave. She smiled when she felt Dane's eyes on her, a smile that was warm and friendly. Dane, suddenly embarrassed, broke his gaze, stirred by the sight of her as he had never been stirred by the sight of any other woman.

"Howdy," Dane said, lifting his Stetson. "Quite an outfit you've got there."

"We're looking for Pete Larkin," the bearded man said. "Is he anywhere around?"

"He'd better not be," Chuck Carradine said ominously. "He ain't real popular in these parts."

"I guess that depends on who's doing the talking," the gunman said.

"You're acting like a bunch of dogs expecting a fight." The girl stepped down and moving toward Dane, extended her hand, man-like. "There's no reason why we shouldn't get acquainted. Perhaps we'll be neighbors before long. I'm Lois Baird." She motioned to the bearded man. "My father, Ben Baird, President of the Jubilee Valley Homemaking Society. And Galt Jochim." She nodded in distaste at the gunman. She brought her eyes back to Dane, a soft humor in them. "I wouldn't be surprised if you never heard of our society before since we made the name up ourselves."

"Pleased to meet you." Dane shook hands with Baird, but Jochim only nodded curtly. "I'm Dane Rupert. These boys ride for Rocking R."

Carradine and the rest grunted a greeting, as interested in Lois as Dane was, and as resentful of Jochim's challenging manners.

"Rupert," Jochim growled. "I guess you're the pup of the old he-coon of Jubilee Valley."

Dane's lips thinned. He had never drawn a gun on a man. He had never wanted to. Now for some strange reason he did. It was men like Galt Jochim who made trouble because trouble was their business. Pete Larkin and Smoky Thoms were cut from the same bolt of cloth. It would take a man such as this Jochim to fan the smoldering coals of Jubilee valley into a raging flame.

"If you're hell-bent for trouble . . ." Carradine began.

"Hold it, Chuck." Dane gripped Carradine's arm as he returned Jochim's insolent stare. The ramrod was pathetically slow with a gun. "Why are you here, Jochim?"

"To see that Mr. Baird and his party get a square deal," Jochim answered easily. "You cowpokes figger you're pretty tough when it comes to shoving a bunch of homesteaders around, but you'd better not start shoving this bunch or you'll settle with me."

"If we have trouble, Galt, we'll need your help," Baird said, his voice steady. "So far we've had none."

"But he'll make trouble, Dad," Lois cried. "You were foolish for hiring the man."

The girl's eyes were blazing. She laid a contemptuous gaze on the gunman's face. Jochim stared back, his look an open insult. Something happened in Dane Rupert then, something he could not analyze, did not understand. He only knew that Lois Baird held the key to his own future, that more than anything else in the world he wanted her to think well of him.

"Sure I'll make trouble," Jochim said coolly, "but I'll get homes for you. She cats like you won't get nothing for your pa but a slug."

With typical insolence of his kind, Galt Jochim had thought he'd overawed the Rocking R men. He had seen no one like himself among them, so he had turned his

attention to the girl as if sensing she was more dangerous to him than all the Rocking R men lumped together. That was the reason he didn't see Dane take the first quick step toward him.

JOCHIM wheeled to face Dane, hand dipping for gun butt, but he was too late. Dane slugged him on the side of the head, battered him to his knees with another hammering punch, and then jerked him to his feet, one hand gripping a shoulder.

"Apologize to the lady," Dane said in cold rage.

"I don't apologize to nobody," Jochim screamed. "Let go and pull your iron, you steer-nursing son . . ."

Dane hit him again, knocking him flat on his back, and pinning his right wrist to the ground with a boot heel. "I'll bust that wrist, hombre, if you don't do what I tell you."

Like most of his kind, Galt Jochim was tough only when he had a gun in his hand. With a broken wrist he'd be as helpless as a child.

"All right," Jochim breathed, and scrambled to his feet the instant Dane moved his boot. "I'm sorry, ma'am." He swung into his saddle, face twisted by a soul-searing rage. "Baird, you are a damned fool for letting this girl run the outfit. Now see how you and your clodbusting friends get along when you swap lead with these cow nurses."

Raking his mount with steel, Jochim went past the store on the run, almost riding Ben Baird down, and took the road over the buttes.

There was a strained silence for a moment. Then Chuck Carradine said, "You should of let me plug him, Dane."

The Rocking R men snickered, the tension broken. Dane smiled. "This ground is sure hard digging, Chuck. I figgered we'd wait till we got back to the valley to plant you."

"Aw hell," Carradine growled. Then he remembered the girl and got red in the face. "Excuse me, ma'am, but these rannies sure do make me mad. They think I'm not fast enough to take that hombre."

"You know danged well you ain't," Dane said. His eyes lingered a moment on the girl, and then came on to Ben Baird. "Maybe I made a mistake, mister, but that hombre would have burned more powder than Jubilee valley's seen since the Piute War. Unless I've got you pegged wrong, you don't want land that way."

"If Dad had listened to me," Lois stormed, "he'd never have hired Jochim and I'd have slept better all the way from Kansas."

Baird wiped his forehead. "I . . . I don't know. We've heard so much about cattle kings and how they keep settlers off the land that we took Larkin's advice and hired a fighting man. We're farmers, Mr. Rupert, but we're also American citizens. If there is good farming land on your father's range that is open to entry, we propose to have it."

"That ain't gonna be easy," Carradine said bluntly. "We don't want no trouble, but we can't run Rocking R beef on grass you've turned under with a plow."

"Then we'll have to do this Jochim's way," Baird said heavily.

"No," Lois cried. "There's other land somewhere that we can have without fighting. We'll find it."

"Larkin wrote that Jubilee valley was the best farming land in this part of the state," Baird said. "How much farther would we have to go, Mr. Rupert?"

"A long ways," Dane answered.

This was the showdown. It had to come sooner or later, and now was as good a time as any. Baird was a reasonable man, but Jed Rupert would listen to him no sooner than he would any other farmer.

"It's desert when you get past Jubilee valley," Carradine said. "Why didn't you stay in Kansas?"

"You can stand only so much," Baird said simply. "There was a sign on a dugout west of our place that expressed our feelings. It said, 'Stove up, burned up, and froze up. The damned grasshoppers can have it.'"

"This ain't exactly heaven," Carradine murmured.

"We aren't looking for heaven," Baird said sharply. "We have some money to get started, and there isn't a man or woman in our colony who is afraid of work."

"You sure picked a daisy when you wrote to Larkin," Carradine grated. "All he wants is to get a locating fee out of you."

An idea had come to Dane Rupert, an idea that shocked him with its possibilities. If he could bring it about, he would have

taken the first step toward realizing the dream that had been in him since his mother's death. Yet now, even as he thought of it, he doubted that Jed Rupert would agree to it. Still he put it into words. It had to be his way, or there would be a war that would bring more suffering to the valley than the Piute struggle had.

"Chuck, I'm taking these people into the valley," Dane said. "If I don't catch you, bring the money back yourself."

"You been eating loco weed?" Carradine demanded. "When Jed . . ."

"I know," Dane said, warming with the glow of hope he saw in the girl's eyes. "Either we'll have these people with us or against us. I'd rather have them with us."

"But Jed . . ." Carradine began.

"He'll see some sense, or the Rocking R's a goner. Now I'd like to talk to the men of your train, Baird."

"Have supper with us," Baird invited. "Then I'll call the men together."

Carradine rode beside Dane to the wagon train, his men splashing across the creek to their camp. Dane, watching the foreman out of the corner of his eyes, sensed what was coming before Carradine put it into words.

Carradine pulled up when they reached the wagon circle and jerked his head at Dane. Baird and Lois rode on, leaving the Rocking R men together.

"You're making the damnedest mistake a man ever made," Carradine growled. "I don't know what kind of a fool notion you've got in your head, but we both know Jed won't never make a deal with nesters."

"I can try," Dane said. "If I've sized Baird up right, he ain't the kind who'll eat slow elk and raise hell in general."

"All nesters are the same to Jed," Carradine snapped. "Dane, you know I haven't liked some of the things your pa's done, but he's handled his own dirty work. He's paid us and fed us better'n average, and put us to handling cattle which same is our business."

Carradine swallowed as if there was something in his throat that wouldn't go down. Dane waited while the foreman built a smoke, his hands trembling. Then Carradine lifted his sun-puckered eyes to Dane, misery in them. "Son, we've been . . . I mean, well, damn it, when you eat out of the same pot and sleep by the same fire, you get so you'd hate like hell to start smoking your gun at each other, but that's how it's gonna be if you side these nesters."

"I'd hate it like hell, too," Dane said simply.

Carradine opened his mouth to say something and then shut it. Wheeling his horse, he rode away, a somber slack-shouldered man.

CHAPTER TWO

Challenge

IT WAS dark by the time the settlers had finished supper and Baird had called them to his fire. Dane, making an estimate of them, was sure he was not mistaken. He had watched a dozen raggle-taggle nester outfits pull into the valley and pay Larkin his locator's fee, drifters who had moved all over the West, continually seeking something for nothing.

There was nothing raggle-taggle about these people. Their wagons were good, their stock well cared for. The men and women were middle-aged or younger, determined but not fanatical. Good folks, Dane thought, the kind who would be farming Jubilee valley long after Jed Rupert and the Rocking R were gone.

Baird introduced Dane to the others and told them what had happened in front of the store. "A lot of you, including my own daughter, never wanted Jochim in the first place, and I've got to admit you were right. The only reason I hired him was because Larkin recommended him."

"You mean Larkin sent him?" Dane demanded.

"He didn't send him, but he knew where he was. We'd been corresponding with Larkin for almost a year. He kept telling us we'd have to fight Rocking R if we expected to get good land and that a man like Jochim could organize us, so I took a trip to Wyoming where Jochim was fighting for some cattlemen. Their trouble was over, so I hired him."

"Now instead of Jochim you've got Jed Rupert's boy," a settler said bluntly. "What kind of sense is that, Ben?"

"Don't look smart for a fact," Baird admitted. "Go ahead, Rupert. Speak your piece."

Dane told them the situation in the val-

ley. Picking up a stick he scratched a map in the dirt. "Here's Buckhorn, the settlers' town where Larkin lives. Here's Whetstone. Not much of a burg. Dad owns it and every year he sends a wagon train to The Dalles for supplies. There are some small spreads on both sides of Rocking R that buy here."

Dane drew a line across the valley. "All the settlers live north of here. This part of the valley isn't much account, but there are some good places in the foothills where the creeks come out of the mountains. All those places are taken."

"That's what Larkin wrote," Baird said. "We want to know about the homestead land that your dad's fenced in around Thunder Springs."

"I'm getting to that." Dane's stick swung around the south half of the valley. "This is rimrock. No place you can get wagons down. That's where the government land is." He retraced the line across the middle of the valley. "This is Rocking R fence. When Dad came here twenty years ago he bought one hundred thousand acres of swamp land from the state."

"Swamp land, hell," a settler howled. "Larkin wrote us about that, too. He said some of it wasn't swamp land at all."

Dane straightened, feeling the hostility these men held for him. Only Ben Baird and Lois seemed to be withholding judgment.

"That's right," Dane said frankly. "Some of it isn't swamp land. There are ridges and sagebrush land that probably never was overflowed, but that ain't important now. What is important is the fact that it's patented land, and Dad is within the law if he keeps you from trespassing."

"But if it was a land graft . . ." Baird began.

"If it's done it's done. The Swamp Land Act gave the Governor, as Land Commissioner, the job of selecting the swamp lands. They were to be sold for at least one dollar per acre and proof of reclamation made within ten years. That's been done and the patent issued. Of course the state wanted as much as possible sold for swamp land because it got the purchase money."

They stirred uneasily, looking at one another and then at Dane, suspicion growing among them. Then a settler at the left end of the semicircle said flatly, "I don't see that we're any better off trading Jochim for you. Jed Rupert's son won't do nuthin' but lead us into a bushwhack trap and get us shot to hell."

He couldn't blame them for thinking that, and he couldn't tell them the whole truth, how his father had used gun and torch to clear the south half of the valley of squatters who had got there ahead of him, nor could he tell them how he felt about his father and what the personal cost to him would be if he took their side. He couldn't tell them, either, of his dream for the valley and that they were the opening wedge in bringing that dream to reality.

"I'll take you through Rocking R's fence," Dane said finally. "The good land Larkin wrote about is here," he pointed with his stick to the map, "near the south rim. There's enough for all of you and there's water to irrigate with."

"What's this gonna get you?" a man demanded.

"Someday this part of the state will form a county of its own," Dane said simply. "When it does, the settlers will be in the majority and they'll get a county court that'll condemn a road through Rocking R range. Then we'll have a flood of nesters pouring in we can't stop. We'll get neighbors who'll clean our range until they break us." He paused, and added, "I don't think you're thieves."

They stared back at him, turning this over in their minds. It was sound and he thought they'd recognize it, but Jed Rupert was another problem. Surrendering a little now to save the most of what he had was strategy he couldn't understand, but there was one small hope. Once these people settled on government land, Jed would be forced outside the law if he drove them off their claims. Even Jed Rupert, stubborn as he was, didn't want a United States marshal nosing around Jubilee valley.

"I say to let him lead us," Ben Baird said at last.

"I dunno," a settler cried. "Looks like a snake trick to me."

"You're damned right it's a snake trick." A stranger rode around a wagon and stepped down. "I've been listening, wondering if you gents were suckers enough to agree to this, and I'm glad you ain't. By tomorrow night you'd be deader'n a side of beef. You'd get to the top of the Iron

Buttes. Then he'd spring his trap." He motioned toward the Rocking R camp across the creek. "Those boys would be waiting for you. They'd gun you down; men. women and children."

"Who are you?" Ben Baird demanded.

The stranger turned slitted black eyes to Baird. "I'm Pete Larkin," he said. "Only the kindness of Providence enabled me to get here in time to prevent you from making a fatal mistake."

A murmur swept the settlers as they looked from Larkin to Dane and back to Larkin. The locator was a stooped bony man, narrow-chested with a bitter vindictive mouth. He was cunning and predictable only to the extent that he could be depended upon to match a bold play with a sly and unexpected one.

"Larkin is interested in his locating fees," Dane said sharply. "Not you or the future of the valley."

"And the Ruperts are interested in holding government land that's open for homesteading," Larkin flung back.

"He's wrong on what I'm interested in," Dane snapped. "The open range will be gone in this country in another ten years. Maybe less. There are two things I want; to prevent a fight and to get neighbors who won't cut our throats."

"Makes sense," a man said.

"There may be something else Mr. Larkin wants," Lois cut in. "If he uses our lives and guns to break Rocking R, he can make a fortune settling other homesteaders on its range."

Lois was the only woman who had spoken. The rest stood behind their men, holding their silence, but Lois was as unlike them as a thoroughbred was unlike a draft horse. She held her head high now, full-bosomed and excitingly feminine, proud and self-assured. Nothing that Dane could have said would have influenced the settlers as much as her words.

"I guess we can keep an eye on Rupert when we cross the summit," a settler said. "If he ain't rigged a gun trap like you said, Larkin, we'll know which one is talking straight."

"You're a pack of fools." Larkin threw up claw-like hands. "Dane here is a level-headed boy, but old Jed won't listen to nothing. Where'll you be when he hits you with his buckaroos?"

"My father is a stubborn man," Dane said frankly. "I can't promise what he'll say or do, but I can promise for myself." His gaze brushed Lois' face. He knew he could never go back on the word he was giving now. "I'll go with you all the way. There's something here that's more important than my father or me or any of you."

"All right," Ben Baird said quietly. "We'll take your orders."

The rest nodded their assent. Pete Larkin, never one to oppose mass opinion unless he could change it, turned his unreadable eyes to Baird. "You'll regret this, my friend." Swinging away from the fire, he mounted and a moment later the sound of his horse's hoofs came back to those in the wagon circle.

"Larkin has a gunslinger named Smoky Thoms," Dane said thoughtfully. "I never saw Larkin without him before. I'm wondering why he wasn't with him tonight."

"Perhaps they met Jochim," Lois said, "and when Larkin found out what had happened, he thought he'd do better without him."

"Maybe," Dane grunted, and knew better.

Smoky Thoms would have been here if he hadn't been somewhere else on a more sinister mission. Dane thought about it when he lay under his blanket, eyes on the tall far-sweeping sky, a strange unease disturbing him when he remembered that Rocking R was guarded only by Jed Rupert and a Chinese cook.

CHAPTER THREE

Smoky Thoms's Mission

THE wagon train uncurled as the early morning sun threw a scarlet light against the Iron Buttes. To the east, purple shadows on the Wild Horse Hills slowly faded as the sun rose into a cerulean sky.

Dane rode at the head of the caravan beside Lois Baird. Once, high on a shoulder of the Buttes, he turned in his saddle and looked back at the valley. The Rocking R herd was a long serpent twisting down the creek. It would be Chuck Carradine riding point. There was this moment of regret when he remembered what the foreman had said, and he wondered if his decision had been right. Then he turned

back, gray eyes somber. When a man made a decision like this, there was only one way he could travel.

That evening Dane, hunkered beside a camp fire atop the Iron Buttes, whittled on a juniper limb and talked to Lois as he had never talked to any other living person. He told her about Jed Rupert and the kind of man he was; he talked about his mother and her beliefs, but mostly he talked about himself and the valley and the dream he had never put into words before.

"It's always the trapper and the missionary who come first," he said. "Then the cattlemen. Then the farmers and the towns. Five thousand people could make a good living in this valley. There'll be a railroad to take the timber out of the Blue Mountains. I'd like to have a part in helping all that happen."

"You will, Dane," she said as if it were a fact and not a prophecy fretted with doubt.

He dropped the piece of juniper and drove the blade of bonehandled knife into the ground. "There'll be men killed first," he said savagely. "Good men who'll die before their time because my father can't see that his day is past."

Ben Baird had come up behind Dane in time to hear what he said. He asked sharply, "You mean you can't influence your father?"

"Nobody influences my father. I told you I could only promise for myself."

"What do you propose to do?" Baird demanded.

"Most of our men are with the herd or riding the fence. A few of them are in the high country. If we're lucky we'll get through the fence and onto the land you want before Dad knows it. Then we will have a talk with him."

"But if he's the kind of a man . . ."

"I said nobody influences him. Circumstances do. How well are you provisioned?"

"Enough to last us through the winter. We knew there wouldn't be any crops this summer."

"Then you'll make out. Just stay off the patented land."

"I see." Baird reached for his pipe, nodding as if he understood. "But when we talk to him . . ."

"There may be trouble." Dane picked up his knife, his eyes on Lois. "You'd better stay in camp."

"No, I'll go with you," she said.

Dane rose, and stood looking down at the girl, the firelight slanting across the dark bronze of his cheeks. For that moment her gaze was lifted to his, her mouth holding an understanding smile. He saw the sweet ripe curve of her lips, the reddish glint of her curly hair, and he turned away, not wanting her to read what must be so easily read on his face.

"Tomorrow you'll see the valley," he said.

They wheeled down the western slope of the Iron Buttes with the sharp light of early morning washing across the valley as the shadows were rolled back. Dane pointed out the cluster of buildings that made up the settlers' town, Buckhorn, the smaller place, Whetstone, that belonged to Jed Rupert, and to the south the Rocking R ranchhouse, corrals, and outbuildings. Beyond were the lakes and vast flat of hayland.

"Tule swamp when we came," Dane told Baird. "Dad drained it and cleared it. Between it and the rimrock there is some high land that was never overflowed. Dad got it with the swamp land. Larkin can call it a land graft, but neither Larkin nor any of your bunch were here to fight the Piutes. Five of Dad's buckaroos were killed in that war."

"I understand," Baird said.

They turned south when they reached the valley floor, and at dusk came to the fence marking the northern boundary of Rocking R's patented land. A sagebrush fire glowed just beyond the barbed wire. A man had pulled his frying pan back and stood up, a Winchester cradled in his arms.

"Trouble," Ben Baird breathed.

"I don't think so," Dane said, and rode on ahead of the caravan.

Eastward the wire came flush against the valley wall that rose precipitously more than one hundred feet; westward distance reduced the posts to splinters, and then they were lost from sight in the half light. The wire was a poor barrier against a nester invasion. The real security lay behind the wire—Jed Rupert's tough reputation.

The guard didn't recognize Dane until he called out, "Stand where you are, mister. That outfit ain't coming through here."

Dane grinned as he reined up. "You

sound plumb proddy, Abe. Got the itch?"

"Hell, I didn't know you, Dane." The guard lowered his rifle. "What is this?"

"Nesters settling at Thunder Springs."

"Jed won't stand for that. What's got into you, Dane?"

"He'll have to stand for it. I had a little trouble with Larkin, and these folks threw in with me. We need 'em on our side."

Abe scratched his head. "I guess we do at that, Dane. Smoky Thoms and a bunch of them toughs Larkin settled in the foothills hit our supply wagons in Pine Canyon. They stole what they could use and burned the rest. Killed every man in the outfit but Rip Benbow."

Fury was in Dane Rupert then, a killing fury that roared through him like a prairie fire under a hard wind.

"Open the gate, Abe. We're going to need nester guns."

Dane reined his horse around and rode back to the caravan. He knew now why Smoky Thoms had not been with Larkin when the locator had visited the caravan on Iron Creek. Then he thought about the men who had died, good men who had been as loyal as any men could be.

There was only one way to read it. It was a finish war. Pete Larkin was making his play to smash Rocking R so the thousands of acres that Jed Rupert had hoarded between his belt of patented land and the south rim would be accessible for homesteaders.

But the settlers, camped on Rocking R land that night, showed only stubborn faces when Dane told them what had happened.

"I ain't getting myself shot to pieces so a cattle baron's outfit won't get busted up," one man said flatly.

"When you followed me instead of Larkin," Dane told them, "you threw in with Rocking R whether you knew it or not. Larkin won't forget."

"We didn't throw in with nobody," the settler snapped, "and we ain't scared of Larkin."

Dane, gaze sweeping the circle of settlers, saw them nod assent. Only Ben Baird turned troubled eyes to Dane. He said, "I'll talk to them."

"Won't do no good," the homesteader growled. "We've got equal votes, and by grab, you ain't talking us into no fight we can get out of."

Tight-lipped, Dane Rupert turned away. Chuck Carradine had been right. He'd made the damnedest mistake a man ever made.

"Dane."

It was Lois's voice, but he didn't stop. He knew his father as a selfish greedy man, but doubt lashed at him now. Perhaps Jed Rupert was right. Maybe you had to fight to get what you wanted; to fight to hold what you had.

It made no difference to these people what it would cost him to have taken them through the gate, to have prevented trouble and saved some of their lives. They had wanted land. All right, they could get it now. All they had to do was to head for it. They couldn't see that by turning their guns against Larkin's bunch they could convince Jed Rupert they were different from the raggle-taggle rainbow riders that had been drifting into the valley.

"Dane."

She was running after him. He heard a man yell, "Let him go, Lois. He got us through the fence. That's all we wanted out of him."

In that instant Dane became Jed Rupert's son. Rocking R would be his someday. All right. He'd fight for it. He'd start tonight by doing the job Jed would have done if he'd been twenty years younger.

"Dane."

He was in the saddle now, looking down at her, taking this last long look at her. It was dark, too dark to see the color of her eyes, that wild curl in her hair, the sweet set of her lips. Too dark to see it, but he knew how it was. He'd never forget, no matter what happened from this moment on.

"Don't go, Dane."

He started to turn his horse. They were suddenly a world apart.

"You can't go, Dane," she cried. "We don't know what land we're supposed to settle on."

Land! She was like the others. Land! As selfish and greedy as Jed Rupert had ever been.

"Follow your nose," he growled, and wheeled his horse.

"Where are you going?"

"To stomp a snake," he yelled back.

The night breeze brought the slowly dy-

ing rhythm of his horse's hoofs to her. The distance between them was too great for him to hear her cry, "Oh, Dane, take me with you."

IT WAS close to midnight when Dane clattered into Buckhorn's short Main Street. There was only one saloon, the Monte Carlo on the north side of the street, its lights a garish glow in an otherwise black and silent town.

Dismounting, Dane racked his horse at the edge of the yellow light pool, checked his gun, and slid it back into leather. He had never killed a man, but he'd either kill Smoky Thoms tonight or take the man to the county seat for trial. There was no doubt in Dane's mind which it would be. Thoms would never be taken.

The batwings swung open with a nudge of Dane's shoulder. He moved to the bar, knowing he was not expected, but knowing, too, that the room would explode in his face the instant somebody recognized him.

A knot of men formed an irregular circle at the far end of the bar. They were talking and drinking, and Dane heard Larkin's words clearly, "Next move is to cut that fence from hell to breakfast."

Dane had reached the mahogany then, and stood so that his right hand swung within inches of his gun. The barman asked, "What'll it be?"

Dane's eyes raked the men. Galt Jochim was there with Larkin. Some were nesters who'd come to the valley within the year, and there were a few Dane hadn't seen before.

For a moment Dane thought Thoms wasn't there. Then he heard the man's deep voice. "It'll be like shooting fish in a barrel. Old Jed has been the big noise on this range so long he figgers nobody's got the guts to tackle him. Now's the time with his crew scattered between here and Ontario."

"What'll it be?" the barman asked again.

"I'm not drinking," Dane said in a flat hard tone that sounded strange to his own ears. "I'm here to kill Smoky Thoms."

"What's that?" the apron asked in astonishment. Then he grinned, and called, "Somebody to kill you, Smoky."

The talk died. They turned, the men at the other end of the bar, and stood as if frozen there.

"Dane Rupert!" It was Larkin's voice, the words jolted out of him as if he had no control over his vocal cords.

Thoms was the first to recover from his surprise. He pushed through the others and paced slowly along the bar toward Dane, a hammered-down bull of a man not over five feet tall with legs thicker than most men's middle and great hairy arms that had the strength to snap a man's neck with a single twist of his meaty hands. A gorilla, this Smoky Thoms, deadly with either his fists or the heavy forty-fives that snugged his thighs.

"So the cub's taking up the ruckus when the old bear gets too old," Thoms mocked, thick lips widening in a taunting grin under his flat nose.

"I heard you and some more of these yellow-bellied clodbusters burned our supply wagons and killed our men," Dane said tonelessly.

"That's right." Thoms' grin widened. "Give me all the credit, kid. It was as easy as shooting grouse. What do you aim to do about it?"

"Take you to the county seat to hang. I reckon Rip Benbow's testimony will be enough to give you a rope dance."

"Now mebbe it would if I was there which I shore as hell ain't. I'm plumb sorry Rip got away. Messy jobs like that hurt a man's reputation."

"Then draw or drag, mister. You can take it here if you don't want a hanging."

"Talk a tough fight, don't you, kid?" Smoky Thoms went for his gun while his friends at the end of the bar scurried for cover.

The men whose lives Smoky Thoms had snuffed out were legion, their graves scattered from Spokane to Tombstone. Thoms, like many others of his kind, had come to believe himself invincible. Or perhaps he knew that Dane Rupert had never killed a man. Whatever the reason, his draw was far too slow. He staggered with the impact of Dane's bullet, the hammer of his own gun still back.

Again Dane fired, for the heavy man's grip on life was grim and tenacious. Then Dane stood motionless, gun barrel tilted upward, and waited while Thoms sagged like a loosely-anchored tent. He went to his knees, and succeeded in holding himself there a moment while he struggled with

his gun, but it was too heavy now with strength flooding out of him in a scarlet stream. He let it go, and fell across it, full out on his face.

THERE was no more feeling in Dane than if he had killed a wolf. Men raised their heads from behind tables and the bar, and stared unbelievingly. When Dane's voice rapped into the stillness, "Were any of the rest of you with Thoms?" there was no answer.

Backing quickly out of the saloon, Dane laced two slugs through the flap doors, and raced out of the patch of light. He mounted, fired at Galt Jochim who had pushed through the batwings and immediately darted back, and left town in a rising dust cloud.

There was no pursuit. Dane had not thought there would be. Larkin made the plans, but they would never have been more than plans if Smoky Thoms had not carried them out with bold and ruthless action. Thoms' death would leave them without the kind of leadership they needed to fight Rocking R.

Buckhorn fell behind, the lights hidden by a ridge, and a grim satisfaction washed through Dane Rupert. For the first time in his life he had done something that would bring pride to his father. Then the satisfaction died, for he was remembering Galt Jochim. Jochim would take Thoms' place. He had his personal reasons for coming after Dane. More than that, he was the kind of man who would take his revenge on the Bairds.

A faint opalescent glow was in the eastern sky above the Iron Buttes when Dane reached Rocking R and pulled gear from his horse. He was tired, for the reaction of the fight with Thoms had set in now. Not wanting to talk, he slipped quietly into the house, but before he'd pulled off his boots he heard a stirring in his father's room. A moment later Jed Rupert stood in the doorway, his gray hair sleep-rumpled, a lamp in his hand. Clad in his undershirt and drawers, he lacked some of the power and dignity that he usually possessed.

"What are you doing here?" Jed demanded.

"To get some sleep mostly. I just killed Smoky Thoms."

"The hell!" Jed wiped a great hand across his face as if to clear the cobwebs from his mind. "How'd you come to do that?"

Dane told him what had happened. Jed put the lamp down on the bureau, and dropped into a rocking chair in the corner. He said nothing when he heard Dane say he'd brought the nester caravan through the gate. His eyes were almost closed, big-knuckled hands folded across his stomach.

Jed held his silence until Dane was finished. Then he stirred. "You should have got Larkin."

Anger built in Dane. "It takes a lot to satisfy you."

"You can always hire gunslingers. It's schemers like Larkin who make the trouble."

Dane built a smoke, realizing suddenly that in killing Smoky Thoms he had actually accomplished nothing. Jed was right about Larkin. Thoms was little fry, and the nester problem was unchanged.

Dane took a long drag on his cigarette, the smoke making a shifting shadow across his face. He said, "Some things have to change, Dad."

Jed rose. "What're you talking about?"

"The government land around Thunder Springs. That's where Baird's bunch will go. You need their help and they need yours. If you'd go to see them and tell them they were welcome . . ."

"Welcome, hell," Jed exploded. "Your taking 'em through the fence won't help 'em. Soon as Chuck and the boys get back, we'll clear 'em out."

"And you'll have a U. S. Marshal on your tail before spring."

"After what Thoms and his nester bunch did to our supply train, I reckon I'll be glad to see a marshal. Save me some trouble."

"Larkin's bunch are outlaws. Most of the others he's located never will amount to anything. These people are different. Every year you send to The Dalles for supplies when most of it could be raised here in the valley and it would cost you half as much if you had the sense to see it."

"You're a fine one to talk about sense!" Jed scowled. "You're crazy if you think wheat and garden sass and such will grow in this valley. It's been tried. This is cow country. Nothing else."

"It hasn't been tried by farmers who knew their business. These people do. Go

out and see them sometime tomorrow."

"I'll see 'em when Chuck and the boys get back." Jed picked up the lamp and moved to the door. "I've never needed the help of any damned nester and I never will. Long as I'm alive I'll hold Rocking R together. When I go, it'll go 'cause you ain't got the sand in your craw to fight for what's yours. Mebbe you're sweet on the gal. Or mebbe you'd rather follow a plow than be a free man on a horse, but I'm telling you one thing. When Chuck gets back, you'll either ride with us or roll your soogans."

Jed slammed the door and stomped down the hall. Dane pulled off his pants and laid down. Slowly sunlight pushed into the room. He heard a dog bark outside, a rooster crow, Chang banging around in the kitchen. They were distant half-heard sounds. Despair was in Dane Rupert. Actually nothing had changed since he had left Rocking R to catch the herd at Iron Creek, and nothing, even defeat could change Jed Rupert.

For a time Dane had been Jed Rupert's son. He would be again if the time came to look at Galt Jochim or Pete Larkin through the smoke of his gun, but in every other way he was farther from his father than ever.

Then Dane's thoughts turned to Lois Baird. He knew that meeting her had made it a different world no matter what Jed Rupert had done or would do, but he couldn't go back to her. He'd been used and discarded. He meant nothing more to her than that. Still, no matter what she thought of him, he could never forget her. She was a fever in his blood stream.

Dane slept at last, the day bright and hot, but it was a sleep without rest. She was there in his mind whether it was the world of reality or of dreams, there to throw the shadow of despair upon him. He was one man, helpless to avert tragedy, helpless to bring into reality the things that he saw ahead. Failure was a bitter biting thing.

WHEN Dane woke it was evening, the first sound breaking through to his consciousness the rattling of pans in the kitchen. He dressed, and found supper waiting for him. "Belly hungly?" Chang asked, grinning broadly.

"Hungry enough even to eat your cooking," Dane said, trying to be funny.

When he had finished, Dane drifted out of the house, an inward restlessness prodding him. It wasn't until he turned toward the office that he saw the bay mare. He stopped, staring, recognizing the mare as Lois Baird's, but not understanding why she was here.

Then he heard his father's voice, gruff and overbearing, "It doesn't make any difference what Dane said or did. You might just as well get it through your pretty little head right now that Rocking R doesn't make any deal with nesters."

"But we have a right to settle . . ." Lois began.

"Right nothing," Jed boomed. "All the valley between the fence and the south rim is mine. Understand? Mine. You've got a few days till my boys get back from Ontario. Then we're coming. Go back and tell your menfolks that they can either drag or drift. If they figure they can outfight us, they're sure in for a surprise. We'll clean 'em out to the last man."

"Then I'll personally see to it that a United States Marshal comes to get you," Lois said defiantly.

"If he does, I reckon he'll take a few nesters back with him. I lost my whole supply train to you or another bunch like you. Every man but one killed. Men who'd worked for me for years. Don't talk to me about law and rights of American citizens. Rocking R stomps its own snakes. We'll clear our range and then we'll burn Buckhorn . . ."

Dane waited to hear no more. He stepped into the office, eyes gray slits. "You'll never get that far, Dad," he said quietly. "We'll be finished a long time before then. If you wipe out the Baird party, you'll give Larkin the excuse he needs to organize the nesters north of Buckhorn and we'll have them all to fight."

"Then by hell we'll fight 'em and we'll lick 'em," Jed bellowed. "I'll take my fence down and Rocking R cows will graze in the streets of Buckhorn."

Lois had turned when she heard Dane's voice and smiled at him, a smile that was like a burst of sunshine on a gray and sodden earth. "I was worried about you," she said, "until your father told me you were all right."

"I'm all right," he said a little gruffly.

He didn't want her to see how he felt. It wasn't possible that this girl who had stirred a tempest in him from the moment he had first seen her could be the one who had cried out that he couldn't go because they didn't know what land to settle on.

It was Dane who broke gaze. He couldn't stand here looking at her. If he did, he'd take her into his arms and kiss her. In Dane Rupert's book it was worse for a girl to listen to a man's dreams and pretend she understood when all the time she only wanted to use him for her own profit than it was for Jed Rupert to shut his eyes to reality.

Suddenly Jed, looking past Dane, began to curse. He stomped out of the office, and Dane, turning as his father left the room, saw in shocked surprise what it was that had aroused Jed. Pete Larkin and Galt Jochim were riding up.

Lois saw them then and cried out. "Larkin came out to our wagons today," she said, gripping Dane's arm. "He offered to locate us free if we'd help him smash Rocking R."

Dane was only half listening. Larkin could guess that Dane would be here, and it wasn't like the locator to risk his own life. Not after seeing Smoky Thoms go down before Dane's gun.

"Dad and I changed the men's minds," Lois was going on. "Larkin made a mistake when he came out because he showed us there would never be law or justice in this valley as long as he could use force to get what he wanted. He said he was going to burn you out and kill both you and your dad."

"Why did he show his hand that way?" Dane asked, still watching the two riders.

"We told him about you riding off last night. Some of the men said they'd got the best of you because you brought them through the fence without a fight and that was all they wanted. Larkin thought all of us looked at this the way he did, so he made his proposition. He told us that we'd always have trouble as long as Rocking R existed. That's why I came over here. I thought I could talk to your father."

"Nobody can talk to him," Dane said bitterly.

"Dad and the rest are riding over this evening. If I convinced your father that we should work together instead of against each other, they were going to stand guard until your trail crew got back."

Larkin and Jochim had reined up and Jed Rupert had shouted, "Get to hell off Rocking R range. I told you to slope out of the country, Larkin."

"We'll go when we hang that tough pup of yours," Larkin said harshly. "He gunned down Smoky last night."

For a moment Jed held his tongue. Then he let out a roar of satisfaction. "He was telling the truth, by damn."

"I dunno what he told you," Larkin said darkly, "but we ain't standing for you running this valley any damned way you please. You're finished, Rupert."

"I'll keep on running the valley for quite a spell yet," Jed raged. "How'd you get through the gate?"

"Takes more'n one man to stop us. He's got a bullet between his eyes and . . ."

Jed reached for his gun, but he was slow. Pathetically slow compared to the way he had drawn his .45 twenty years ago when he'd run rough shod over everybody in the valley who opposed him. But it wasn't Jochim who shot him. Another gun from the corner of the barn opened up and Jed Rupert went down in a slow ponderous fall.

Dane had been watching Jochim, his own hand on gun butt. Now he stepped through the door.

"Pull your iron, Jochim," Dane called.

Dane never knew how Larkin and Jochim had aimed to play their scheme out. Probably they had assumed he would be with his father, and their drygulchers who had bellied up a dry wash beyond the corrals were supposed to cut him down, but it didn't work that way because Dane stood with a corner of the office building between him and the bushwhackers.

Larkin whirled his horse and cracking the steel to him, headed for the cover of a shed, but Jochim stood his ground and made his play. He was fast, faster than Smoky Thoms, faster than Dane, but speed wasn't enough. His bullet snapped above Dane, hit the stone wall of the office building and screamed away. Then Dane brought him out of his saddle in a rolling fall, his horse whirling and bucking away.

Larkin, low in the saddle, made no effort to pull his gun until he had almost reached the shed. He fired then, a wild shot, and was out of sight before Dane could fire.

"Your father," Lois cried. "He's getting up."

It was true. He was on his feet, weaving like a drunken man, blood making a widening stain across his shirt.

"They'll get him again," Dane cried, and jerked a rifle off the wall. "Can you shoot?"

"I know what to squeeze," the girl said evenly, and took the .30-.30 from him. "Get out there. I'll dust them off."

Dane raced across the yard, shoulders bent and following a zigzag path. They opened up as he knew they would. Perhaps it was part of Larkin's scheme to flush him into the open, but they hadn't counted on Lois. Dane heard her shoot, felt a slug tag him in the shoulder, saw Jed take two more wobbly steps toward a horse trough and fall again.

Dane reached his father. Sliding his Colt into leather, he gripped the big man's shoulders and pulled him through the yard dust to the trough. It took no more than the space of a dozen clock ticks, but for those seconds he made a high target for Larkin's killers. One of them, hidden from Lois, laced a bullet into Dane Rupert's back. He was knocked flat across his father's body. It seemed as if he kept on falling into a pit that was without light and without bottom.

They were days of unreality that followed, days in which he saw Lois beside his bed. Sometimes his father was there, or Ben Baird. Or a stranger with a gray goatee. Then Chuck Carradine and some of the trail crew looked in and Chuck shook his head and turned quickly away, muttering, "I can't look at him. That ghost just ain't Dane."

But there was another day when the fever was gone, and Dane could think and see. Ben Baird who had been reading at a window rose and left the room. A moment later Jed came in, thinner than Dane had ever seen him, his left arm in a sling.

"Been waiting for today for quite a spell, son," Jed said. "You've been about as close to death as a man can get and still kick his way back."

"You look like you've had a tough time yourself," Dane said.

"Not so bad. I'm going to feel right good as soon as I get some talking out of my system. I had my own look into eternity and saw what hell was and no mistake. In all the powder-smoking I've ever done I never felt a slug before and it scared me to death. That's when I had a look at myself and what I'd done and what I'd been. I didn't like what I saw."

Jed cleared his throat and grinned a little. "I've been on my back awhile and had lots of time to think. I kept remembering what you said about having our supplies raised in the valley by farmers who knew their business. It makes sense and that's what we're going to do. Baird's bunch is settled. Got their cabins up and some land broken. We won't have no trouble with him."

He scowled then, a little more like the old Jed Rupert. "Hell, they won't even have any trouble with me. They're pretty good folks, them nesters. If they hadn't had a doctor with them, we'd both have cashed in our chips. And that girl! You know, you and me were lying back of that trough a long time before they came."

"Who came?"

"The nesters, Ben Baird in front and busting a hole in the breeze. Like I was saying, the gal kept blazing away from the office. Tagged two of 'em and drilled Larkin center. Yessir, that's what she did. If she hadn't, all they'd needed to have done was to have walked up and drilled us."

Jed heard a board creak and looking around, saw Lois. "There she is now. Reckon I'd better go see about some poker with her dad."

Lois sat down on the bed, her soft hand on his forehead, smiling gently as if this was a moment she had thought would never come. "It's nice to feel your head cool again. It's been so hot."

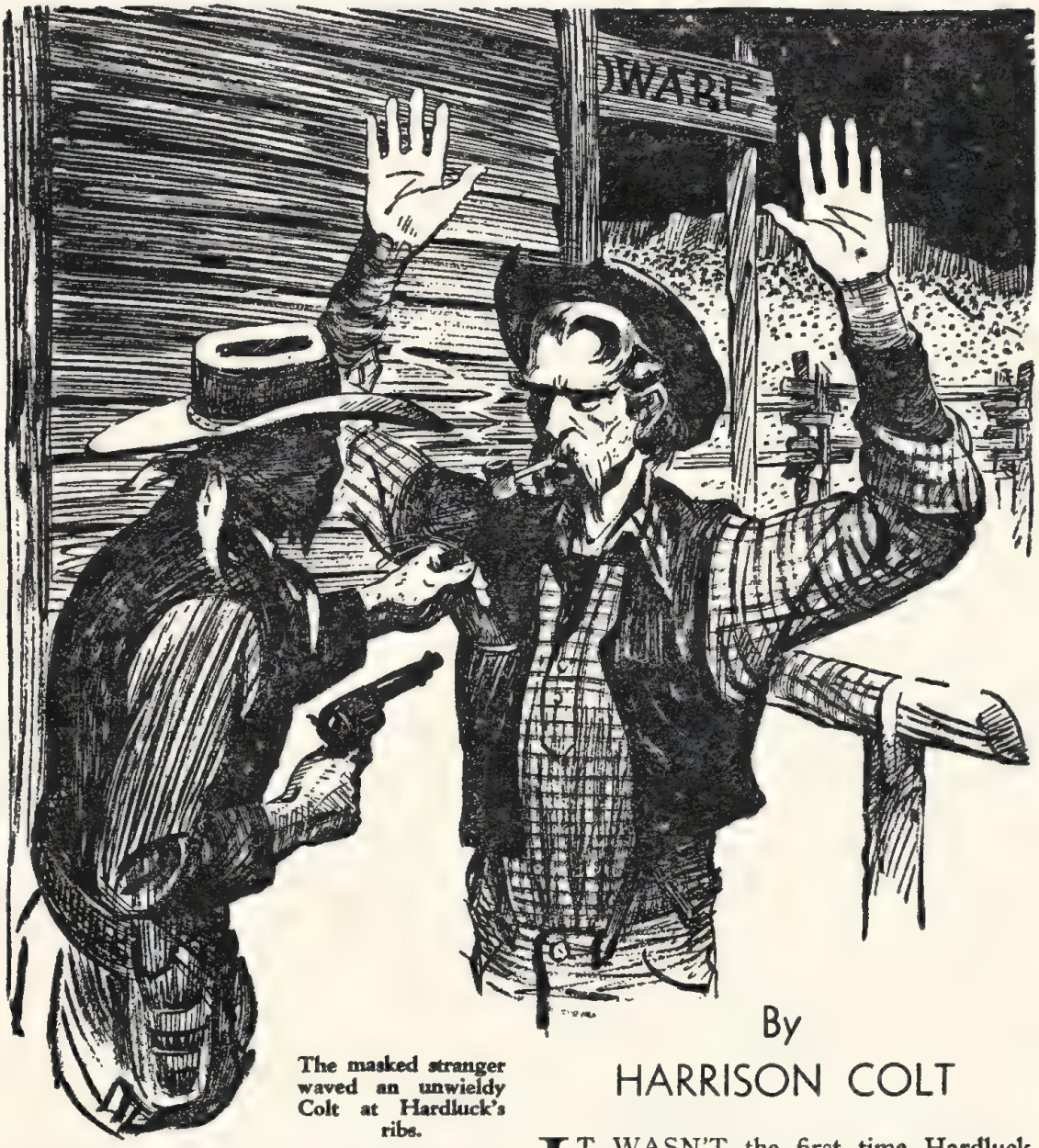
He lay looking up at her, thinking about how much she had done for him and his father and how that a little of his dream had come true. Then he asked the question that had grown roots in his mind, the question he had to ask.

"The night we came through the fence," he said, "you wanted me to stay to show you the land you were to settle on."

She looked away, blushing. "It was silly, Dane. I thought it might make you stay. I was afraid I'd never see you again, and I couldn't think of anything else just then."

THE END

HARDLUCK JONES— HOODOO-BUSTER!



The masked stranger waved an unwieldy Colt at Hardluck's ribs.

Hardluck Jones, desert rat, peered into the black muzzle of his tinhorn partner's sixgun and knew the fortune he had just given to a total stranger had signed his death warrant.

By HARRISON COLT

IT WASN'T the first time Hardluck Jones was returning to Bachelor's Gulch empty-handed. More times than he cared to remember, he had made his way up this same street, past these same weather-beaten frame buildings.

He wore his battered black felt hat jammed well forward on his graying head, and squinted his faded blue eyes against the

glare of the broiling sun that beat mercilessly down on the dusty, wagon-rutted street. The thin shoulders of his tall, gaunt figure had a slight stoop, as he plodded along between the ramshackle rows of sun-blistered stores, saloons and dance-halls. At his heels, loaded down with pick and shovel and other prospector's equipment, trudged an aged burro.

In front of the Alamo Saloon he halted, mopping his damp brow with the sleeve of his red flannel shirt. The thought of a large schooner of ice-cold beer urged him toward the batwing doors. But he hesitated, deciding against it. Time enough for that after he had seen old man Bennett.

For nearly a dozen years now, John Bennett, owner of the General Store in town, had grub-staked him. And while Hardluck had not an ounce of gold to show for the months he had been poking around in the Sierra Monterras, he felt he had at least encouraging news. Certain signs had convinced him that one of the high valleys held a rich streak of color. He felt sure that his next trip would uncover it.

He continued a short distance up the street to the large, barn-like structure that was Bennett's store. He tied his pack animal to the rail, and his heavy boots thumped loudly across the warped planks of the porch.

Hardluck paused for a moment inside the door to let his eyes get accustomed to the dimness after the bright glare of the street. A man moved toward him from the back of the store, but it wasn't Bennett. This man was small, baldish, in his forties.

"Bennett?" The man gave him a curious stare. "Bennett's dead. Died three, four months ago . . . I'm the new owner and my name's Craig. Ain't had time to have a new sign painted on the front with my name on it, but I'll get around to it one of these days. What kin I do for you, friend?"

Hardluck Jones didn't seem to be listening. There was a stunned, grief-stricken expression on his brown, leathery features. After a minute, he said, "John dead? It don't seem possible!"

A flicker of annoyance came into the little man's face. "What did you expect? Bennett was an old man. We all got to go some time, friend. Now, as I was sayin', if there's anything you need . . ."

His voice ran on, discussing the merit of the goods on his shelves, but to the tall man his words had little meaning. His thoughts were crowded with memories of the snowy-haired, gentle-eyed man who stood so often behind the counter where the little man was now standing.

He had owed much to Old Man Bennett. Always he had believed that the day would come when he could repay the storekeeper for his faith. Now, he realized bitterly, that day would never be.

Hardluck became aware that the little man had stopped talking, was staring at him with a touch of anger in his eyes. "I don't think you've heard a word I been sayin' . . . Well, are you?"

Hardluck frowned. "Am I what?"

"Are you interested in buyin' anything or did you jest come in to waste my time?" snapped Craig.

"Sorry. I reckon there's quite a smatter of things I need from the store here. Only thing is, I don't happen to have the cash . . ."

"Oh!" The storekeeper regarded him bleakly, all the friendliness gone from his eyes. "So you're the one they told me about! The feller Bennett allowed to stock up at the store year after year without payin' a cent. Well, if you think you kin get me to do any fool thing like that you're badly mistaken, mister!"

"I don't reckon you quite understand," explained Hardluck. "What he was doin' was to grub-stake me. If I had struck pay-dirt, he would have shared a half-interest."

"I understand well enough!" snorted Craig. "Bennett was a soft-headed fool! He let you rook him out of Lord only knows how much supplies and merchandise! And what did he have to show fer it? When he died the mortgage on this store was so big, his son barely got two hundred dollars after it was sold!"

"His son?" Hardluck's voice betrayed surprise. "I didn't know the old man had a son?"

Craig eyed him, making no attempt to conceal his scorn. "Fools like Bennett always have sons—usually they're even bigger fools than their fathers! Take young Bennett now. Had a good position in a bank back East, but when he heard about the old man's illness he give it up and brought his family out here. Managed to git a job clerkin' in the Citizens' Bank

across the street at less'n half the salary he was gittin'. And yet the young fool seems to have money to throw away at the gamblin' tables over at the Alamo Saloon!"

As he finished speaking, the little man's glance darted toward the street and he stepped around the end of the counter and took his place by the door. Hardluck saw that his eyes were fastened intently upon the young woman and the child who had just emerged from the two-storied brick bank across the street.

"There's young Bennett's wife and girl now." Craig's eyes rested with evident approval on the slender, graceful figure of the woman. "Shame a woman as pretty as that has to go and waste herself upon a fool like Bennett!"

Hardluck watched as woman and child climbed into the rig hitched before the bank and drove away. He turned back to Craig, frowning slightly. "Something wrong with the little girl's leg?"

The bald little storekeeper nodded. "Foot was crippled in an accident just after they arrived from the East. Runaway horse. I don't know how much Bennett spent on doctors, even sent the girl to Denver for an operation. But, like you see, it don't seem to have done any good. If he'd had any sense, he'd have saved the money."

Hardluck sighed. "Something about seein' a crippled younker that always makes me feel kinda bad," he said. "Well, mebbe I'll see you a little later, Craig. If I kin get someone interested in grub-stakin' me."

Craig regarded him dubiously. "Be glad to sell you anything you want," he said. "*If* you got the cash to pay fer it!"

HARDLUCK stepped into the white-hot glare of the sun-drenched street. He decided he needed a drink and turned back toward the Alamo. Regret at the passing of his friend weighed heavily upon him.

Wearily, he thrust aside a batwing and stepped inside a long room that smelled strongly of whiskey and stale tobacco smoke. At this hour, there were hardly more than half a dozen men lined up at the long mahogany bar. An equal number hovered about a table at one side of the room where a poker game was in progress.

As Hardluck advanced to the bar, several men gave him friendly nods. But it remained for the portly bartender to greet him loudly by name. "Damn if 't ain't Hardluck Jones! What'll yuh have, Hardluck?"

The bartender seemed to be in a talkative mood. As he carefully tipped a bottle of Sam Taylor above Hardluck's glass, he inquired, "Strike paydirt yet, Hardluck?"

There was a sudden quiet in the room. Even the poker players looked up, their game forgotten for the moment. One of the players, a dapper, thin-faced man in the neat attire of a professional gambler, narrowed his sharp eyes upon the prospector intently.

Hardluck was aware that this silence held more than the usual tense expectancy that followed such a question. He saw a sly, half-concealed amusement on some of the faces turned toward him. One man, a stout townsman whose cheek bulged with a chew of tobacco, grinned openly and winked at his neighbor.

Because they were obviously waiting for him to shake his head glumly and admit he'd had his usual luck, it gave him a faint satisfaction to say, "I dunno. Might have, at that."

"What's that?" asked someone in a startled voice. "Yuh mean yuh raised color?"

"Wouldn't exactly say that," replied Hardluck. "Did run across a promisin' lead though. Trouble was I run out of supplies that same day. I won't know anything definite till my next trip."

The fat townsman eyed him with suspicion. After a moment, he said, "You ain't got nobody to grub-stake you, have you, Hardluck—now that Bennett's dead?"

The gaunt man felt a stirring of anger. He knew what the other man was driving at.

"Sure," he growled. "I am lookin' for someone to grub-stake me. But every word I said was true. I think I got better than an even chance of runnin' into something good. Go ahead and laugh if you want to. Later, mebbe you won't have the chance!" Angrily he turned back to the bar and poured a drink.

For a moment or two there was a strained silence in the saloon. Then the quiet hum of voices resumed, the card players again turned their attention to the game, men took their former places at the bar. All except one man, a pale-faced young

man whose clothes proclaimed him a recent arrival from the East.

He sidled up beside Hardluck, an eager look on his bony, rather weak-jawed face. "What you said just now interests me," he said. "I mean about you wanting someone to grub-stake you. As I understand it, that means that if I were to pay the expenses of your journey, I'd be entitled to a share in whatever gold you found—is that right?"

Hardluck jerked his head around quickly and blinked a few times in astonishment. "That's right, mister."

"Sounds like a fair enough proposition. How much of a grub-stake would you need?"

Hardluck stared at the pale-faced young man, excitement sparking his blue eyes. "You mean you're willin' to take a chance on grub-stakin' me?"

"Why not? Shall we step over to one of those tables against the wall and talk things over?"

AFTER they had taken chairs at one of the tables, Hardluck learned that the young man's name was Gordon Selby, that he had inherited a fair-sized fortune from his parents, and that the thought of owning a gold mine filled him with enthusiasm.

"There's just one thing," said Hardluck finally. He shifted uneasily in his chair. "You're new in these parts, and so mebbe you never heard of me before. You got any idea why they call me Hardluck?"

Selby frowned. "Can't say I have."

"Well," explained the prospector with a sigh, "I ain't exactly what you'd call a lucky man. Things have happened to me that got the boys to callin' me Hardluck. Mebbe it'll be like that again this trip. I'm tellin' you this so you kin back out if you want to. I reckon there's some in town that'd tell you you'd be a damn fool to grub-stake such an unlucky cuss as myself."

Gordon Selby stared at him in surprise. "Nonsense!" he exclaimed impatiently. "I don't believe in any such rot! Besides, my mind is made up. Mr. Jones, you have your grub-stake. Furthermore—"

He broke off abruptly and darted a startled glance at the table where the poker game was taking place. The voice of one of the players had risen sharply in anger.

"Damn you, Makin! What you tryin' to pull here? You needn't tell me you'd git that kind of cards if the deal was on the level!"

Hardluck saw that the man was addressing his remarks to the thin-faced gambler across the table from him. The gambler leaned forward and replied, but his voice was so soft it must have been audible only to the men seated about the table.

Next moment, the enraged player had flung his hand in the other's face, pushed back his chair, and jumped to his feet. His hand clawed for the six-gun at his belt. But Makin was quicker. A derringer appeared suddenly in his hand, and its report echoed loudly within the clap-board walls of the saloon.

The other man slid to the floor, groaning.

The sound of the shot brought a stout, swarthy-faced man from a room at the rear of the saloon. His snacky-black eyes gleamed with anger as he saw the smoking derringer in the gambler's hand, the man lying in a pool of blood on the floor.

"What the hell's goin' on here, Makin?" he snarled. "What's the meanin' of this?"

The gambler shrugged his neat, black-clad shoulders, a cool indifference in his sallow features. "Couldn't help it, boss. Damn fool went for his gun. I had to shoot in self defense. Ain't that so, boys?"

Several of the other men nodded, but the heavy-bodied man retained his anger. "Makin," he said, "I hired you to take care of my roulette wheel evenin's after nine. What you do on your own time ordinarily don't concern me. But this time it does. Richards was a good customer of the Alamo. Besides, this is gonna give the sheriff a chance to make more trouble for the place. I got half a mind to give you your walkin' papers!"

Makin's face was devoid of expression, but anger sharpened the glint of his keen eyes. "That's all right with me, Morgan," he said quietly. "I'm fed up with this cheap joint anyhow!"

The saloon proprietor stared at the gambler for a moment without saying anything. Then he gave an angry grunt. "Good riddance!" he said. "You'll handle the wheel to-night. By tomorrow night I'll have a new man to take your place."

After Morgan had directed several of

the men to carry the wounded Richards down the street to Bachelor's Gulch's one medico, he pulled a huge red bandana and mopped his damp and shining face. As he did so, his gaze happened to fall on the two men seated at the nearby table.

"Hardluck Jones!" A faintly malicious smile twisted his lips, and he moved ponderously across the room. "You struck it rich yet, Hardluck?"

Hardluck tried to conceal his dislike for the ample-bellied saloon owner. "Not yet," he replied tersely.

Griff Morgan chuckled. "Not yet, eh? You still have hopes your luck is gonna change some day, haven't you, Hardluck?"

"You don't figger it will?"

Again the fat proprietor of the Alamo chuckled. "No," he said. "Your luck ain't never gonna change, Hardluck. You was born under an unlucky star and you'll die the same way." His black eyes shifted curiously to the bony-faced Easterner seated beside Hardluck, and paused there thoughtfully. "Young Selby, isn't it?" he said pleasantly. "I've heard of you. How about steppin' back to my office for a little talk? I understand you've got some money to invest, and it's just possible that I may be able to help you—"

"Thanks just the same," broke in Selby. "But I've already found what I've been looking for. To begin with, I've decided to grub-stake Mr. Jones here."

Griff Morgan gave Hardluck a quick glance of annoyance. He pulled up a chair and eased his portly frame onto it, mopping his brow.

"I hate to see a man throw away his money," he commented. "If you want to do some gamblin', why don't you come back to the Alamo this evening and take a fling at our games? You kin have a choice of roulette, faro or monte. That way you'll at least git a good long run fer your money."

Hardluck's face darkened with anger. "He'd be a fool to try buckin' them crooked games of yours, Morgan!"

Griff Morgan's snaky-black eyes were hard, venemous. He growled, "I'd be mighty careful about sayin' things like that, Jones. My games are strictly on the level!"

"I've heard different!" Hardluck flung back.

THE fleshy features of the saloon owner flushed with anger. He turned his attention to Selby. "Look, friend," he said sullenly, "you might git the idea this talk about luck is exaggerated. But that's because you're new in the West. Out here, luck is important. It means all the difference between success and failure. Why, even if Hardluck was to stumble across the richest streak of color yet uncovered, something would happen before he got a chance to cash in on it. Like the time he rode into town here with fifty thousand dollars in his saddlebags . . ."

Gordon Selby sat straighter in his chair, and amazement darted across his pallid features. "Fifty thousand dollars!"

Morgan nodded, and the twisted, malicious grin came back to his lips. "He didn't tell you about that, eh? Well, it must have been nearly twenty years ago, yet I remember it like it was yesterday. Seems Hardluck had struck a rich vein up on Squaw Creek, and sold out to man named Harley Davies. He was anxious to get back East. A girl, wasn't it, Hardluck? But what happened? Next day the east-bound stage was held up. Robbers took the fifty thousand. It was after that they started callin' him Hardluck. What's more that claim he sold for fifty thousand turned out to be worth millions. Davies became a rich man, even ended up bein' president of a railroad and a U. S. Senator."

The saloon-keeper's words seemed to have deepened the tiny lines in Hardluck's sun-toughened countenance. He sat stiffly in his chair, the stoop in his shoulders more pronounced. His eyes were clouded by bitterness, as memories crowded in upon him.

"And that's not all," went on Griff Morgan. "Once an old prospector that Hardluck had done some favor for made a strike up north of here. Found some nuggets big as eggs layin' around, they say. So he gits hold of Hardluck and the two of them start out to file their claims. But before they reach the place where he discovered the gold, the old man has a heart attack and dies without bein' able to say another word. Those are just a few of the stories they tell. Now do you see what I mean, friend?"

Selby looked uneasy. He stared over at the tall, gaunt man with troubled eyes. After a moment, he said, "Perhaps it'd

be best if I thought this over for a day or so, Mr. Jones. After all, like this gentleman says, I'd be foolish to rush into anything without knowing what I was doing—now wouldn't I?"

Hardluck said, "Reckon mebbe you would."

He watched as Selby got up from his chair, paused uncertainly for a moment, then headed for the door. Morgan raised himself with an effort. His black eyes were filled with malice as he stared down at the prospector. "Your luck ain't changed any, Hardluck. And as far as I'm concerned if it never does that'll be too soon!" He swung around and headed for his office at the rear of the saloon.

AFTER a minute Hardluck got up from the table and walked over to the bar to get a drink. The thin-faced gambler, Makin, was standing there, his sharp eyes studying Hardluck covertly. He said quietly, "So Morgan talked the tenderfoot out of grub-stakin' you? You gonna let him get away with it?"

Hardluck shrugged his shoulders. "Ain't much I kin do about it, it seems."

"I wouldn't say that," replied the gambler in a low voice. "You know, I'm not exactly fond of Morgan either. I think I know a way you could get your grub-stake and more beside."

Hardluck regarded the gambler with narrowed eyes. "I don't reckon I get what you're drivin' at, mister."

Makin cast a quick glance up and down the long room. "This ain't exactly the best place to talk. Suppose you come to my room at the hotel in half an hour?" He spun on his heel and left the saloon.

Hardluck gazed after him thoughtfully. There was something about this thin-featured, sharp-eyed man that filled him with distrust. He kept remembering the look of cool detachment on the man's face as he had stared down at the man he had shot. But it might not be a bad idea to find out what he had on his mind. Hardluck decided to keep the appointment.

Twenty minutes later, he followed the other man into the street and made his way toward the hotel. The fiery sun had altered its position in the heavens, and the slanting shadows of the buildings were groping for the board sidewalk on the opposite side. But there was no breeze, and the heat was still oppressive.

Presently the tall, gaunt man was knocking at the door of the gambler's room. Makin admitted him, then carefully locked the door behind him. The room was like an oven, and although the gambler had removed his coat and opened his shirt at the throat, tiny beads of moisture dampened his high, narrow forehead. He had not bothered to remove his shoulder holster, and the sight brought back to Hardluck's mind the swiftness of his draw earlier that afternoon.

There was a bottle of whiskey and two glasses on the dresser, and Makin filled them and held one out to his visitor. Then he nodded toward the room's only chair and dropped himself onto the bed.

Hardluck emptied his glass and carefully placed it on the floor beneath his chair. "All right, Makin. What's this all about?"

Swifty the quiet-voiced gambler launched into his scheme for evening accounts with the owner of the Alamo Saloon. When he had finished, his keen eyes narrowed on Hardluck's face. "Well, what do you say? Will you do it?"

For an instant Hardluck hesitated. But the memory of Griff Morgan's taunting, triumphant voice came back to him, stirring anger in his faded blue eyes. He climbed to his feet. "Anything to get back at that damn tub of lard!" he agreed.

Makin smiled, but there was a chill dryness to his voice as he said, "Just one thing more, Jones. Don't try double-crossin' me! You'll never get away with it—remember that!" The gambler's eyes had an ugly gleam in their depths. Hardluck felt, even in that oven-like room, an icy chill crawl across his back.

IT WAS shortly after eleven that evening that Hardluck put in an appearance at the Alamo Saloon. He shoved through the dense throng of miners, townspeople and hurdy-gurdy girls that packed the large room, making his way to the gambling tables at the rear.

All the tables were well patronized, and he stood for a minute or two watching the monte game, listening to the repetitious cry of the dealer, "Watch the ace!" Then he drifted along past the faro bank and took his place among the men huddled about the

clacking roulette wheel waiting for Makin.

Makin, his face paler and thinner than ever under his green eyeshade, glanced up and saw him, but allowed no flicker of recognition to reveal itself in his eyes. "Place your bets, gentlemen," he called in a monotonous sing-song. "Anybody want chips?"

Hardluck edged forward, dropped several gold coins on the table. Someone in the crowd at his back called out, "Better not sell any chips to Hardluck there. He's likely to bust the house wide open!"

This humorous sally stirred a chorus of chuckles and guffaws from the on-lookers. Hardluck ignored the laughter, placed his few chips on odd and won. He let the whole amount ride and won again.

He switched to even, and for the third time saw his pile of chips doubled. He played black and black came up. There was a sudden stir of excitement among the spectators. Men from the other tables crowded over to watch. They regarded Hardluck with astonished eyes, derision and amusement gone from their faces.

An expensively-dressed young man forced his way through the crowd, and Makin gave him a friendly nod. "You playin' this evening, Reed?"

The young man shook his head. "No —I guess not," he said uncertainly. "A little later, maybe." Hardluck sensed a note of desperation in his tone. It was that, and the look of half-concealed worry in his gray eyes that attracted Hardluck's attention. As he studied the younger man's well-formed features, he was puzzled by the feeling that they were somehow familiar to him.

But the gambler's voice drew his attention back to the gaming table. Again the wheel spun, the ball clacked around and around. A gasp went up from the ever-growing crowd of on-lookers as the tall, gaunt man won again.

Griff Morgan, evidently warned by one of his men, emerged from the room at the back and rudely shouldered his way through the tightly-jammed spectators. His eyes fell upon the pile of chips before Hardluck and widened in astonishment. Then, sudden suspicion narrowing his snaky-black eyes, he shot a quick glance at Makin, rage growing on his fleshy features.

He stood watching the wheel spin again. Hardluck had bet on red, and red was the winning color. The saloon owner glared angrily, seemed on the point of saying something, then decided to remain silent.

From the hate-filled manner in which Morgan was eyeing Makin, it was evident that he realized what was going on. But the thin-faced gambler only grinned back at him, confident in the knowledge that the saloon owner could not protest without revealing to the Alamo's patrons the fact that the wheel was crooked.

"Place your bets, gents," called Makin.

The gambler glanced across the table at Hardluck, gave an almost imperceptable nod of his head. Hardluck felt a sudden queasiness at the pit of his stomach. He leaned forward and stacked his pile of chips so as to touch equally four of the numbered sections of the betting layout. He was staking everything on the chance that one of the four would be the winning number. If he won, the house would be forced to pay off at the rate of eight to one.

The crowd waited, hushed and tense. Morgan was glaring around wildly, nervously. He pulled a bandana from his pocket and mopped his perspiring brow.

The wheel spun, came to a stop. Makin said carelessly, "The gentleman wins again."

A gasp of astonishment went up from the spectators, and Hardluck said, in a voice slightly off-key, "Reckon that'll be enough for to-night. I'm cashin' in my chips."

Makin turned his sharp-eyed gaze in the direction of the Alamo's proprietor. "The gentleman is cashing in his chips," he announced quietly. "Looks like you'll have to get some money from the safe."

For several moments Griff Morgan stood without moving, his swarthy features flushed with anger. He seemed to be debating the advisability of making a sudden move toward the heavy six-gun strapped to his huge middle. He took so much time a man in the crowd called, "What's the matter, Griff? You ain't in much of a hurry to pay off when a man beats your game, are you?"

Other voices joined in, and an angry muttering arose. Reluctantly Morgan swung around, moved to the door of his office and passed out of sight. He returned almost immediately with several bags of gold dust, and sullenly weighed out the required amount.

Before he left the saloon, Hardluck bought drinks for everybody. He gazed about at the milling throng lined up at the bar, hoping to catch a further glimpse of the neatly-dressed young man Makin had addressed as Reed. But he was nowhere in sight. The young man's resemblance to someone he had known still bothered Hardluck. . . .

A few minutes later, Hardluck stepped out into the blackness of the street and started for the hotel. Despite his efforts to walk quietly, the tall man's heavy boots aroused hollow echoes on the planks of the sidewalk.

He had proceeded only a short distance when a quick step sounded behind him and the hard muzzle of a six-shooter was jabbed into his back. He jerked his head around in surprise, saw that a masked man had stepped from the deep shadow of an areaway between two darkened stores.

"Reach for the sky, mister!" said the man softly. "Make a move and you're a dead man!"

Hardluck cursed softly under his breath, but he slowly raised his hands. The man stepped forward, hesitated for a second. "Sorry to do this," he apologized. "If it wasn't for the hole I'm in—" He located the pokes of gold dust in the prospector's pockets and quickly transferred them to his own.

As Hardluck saw the sacks of gold disappear into the other man's coat, desperation grew within him. He darted a sudden, swift glance into the darkness somewhere beyond the black shadow of the robber, jerked out a sharp, "Look out, Bill!"

It was an old trick. But it worked. The robber cast a startled glance behind him and Hardluck stepped in and knocked him sprawling, the gun clattering harmlessly on the plank walk.

When the other man sat up a moment later rubbing his jaw, Hardluck was standing over him, covering him with his own six-shooter.

"New at this game, ain't you?" inquired Hardluck.

The man was slow in replying. "How'd you know that?"

"I've been held up by experts," Hardluck informed him.

Slowly the other man got to his feet, shaking his head in despair. "Don't seem like I'm much good at anything," he said bitterly. "Reckon you'd be saving everybody a lot of trouble if you was to pull that trigger."

The desperation in the man's tone sounded familiar. Hardluck suddenly remembered where he'd heard it before. He reached out and pulled the bandana from the man's features, peered intently through the darkness. "I know you!" he exclaimed. "Ain't you the young feller I seen in the Alamo a little while ago? I think Makin called you Reed. . . ."

The young man nodded. "That's my name—Reed Bennett."

"Bennett!" Hardluck's eyes widened, his jaw sagged. "Not John Bennett's son?"

The other nodded.

"But this doesn't make sense!" protested Hardluck. "Why would John Bennett's son wait in a dark street to rob a man at the point of a gun? Why?"

Reed Bennett gave a bitter laugh. "A man can get desperate enough to try anything. When I saw your winnings tonight, I guess I lost my head. I came out here and waited, hoping you'd come out alone."

"But why?" Hardluck persisted.

Bennett said, "That's a long story. I hardly think you'd be interested."

But at Hardluck's gruff insistance, he explained. When his daughter had been hurt by the runaway horse, the doctors had informed Bennett that a trip to Denver and an immediate operation was the only thing that could save the child's leg. Reed Bennett had been hard-pressed to raise the money. Desperate, he had borrowed some of the bank's funds, intending to replace them as soon as his dead father's affairs were settled. But the final accounting of Old Man Bennett's estate had come as a shock, amounting to only a few hundred dollars, far less than the amount needed to cover his shortage. Then it had occurred to him that it might be possible to win the necessary amount at the gambling tables. But it hadn't turned out that way. Instead, he had gotten in deeper and deeper. . . .

"That's why I tried to rob you," he concluded hopelessly. "To keep from going to jail for embezzlement of the bank's money."

There was a brief silence. Hardluck was remembering the unpaid debt he owed Old Man Bennett. He said, thoughtfully, "How

much do you need to square yourself?"

"God help me!" exclaimed the young man. "Slightly more than thirty-one thousand dollars!" . . . .

THE day's heat still lingered in Makin's room on the second floor of the hotel. Hardluck stood by the window, his gaunt tallness a blacker shadow against the rectangle of grayness. He gazed down into the dark street and waited.

He was remembering what the gambler had said to him earlier in this very room, remembering every lift and cadence to the man's quiet, chilling voice as he said, "Don't try double-crossin' me! You'll never get away with it!"

Faint sounds on the walk below attracted his attention, and a few moments later he heard quickly hurrying footsteps in the hall. The door opened, a man slid inside the dark room. "Jones?" said a low voice.

"Over by the window," said Hardluck.

"Good! For a moment I thought . . ." A match flared in the blackness, and Makin lit the kerosene lamp on the dresser. He swung around, his eyes bright and eager.

Hardluck wiped the sweaty palms of his hands on the sides of his pants' legs. "Sorry, Makin. I ain't got it."

"Ain't got it!" Suspicion darted across the gambler's thin face. His right hand slid inside his coat, and Hardluck knew his fingers were curling around the butt of his ugly derringer. His black eyes narrowed menacingly.

Hardluck's mouth felt dry as sand. "I was held up just as I stepped out of the Alamo. He got the dust."

Makin's gun came out of its shoulder holster, covered the tall man. The gambler stood glaring at him, his eyes shining with rage.

But suddenly, Makin muttered a disgusted oath and lowered the weapon. "If it were anybody but you, I'd kill him!" he growled. "But I reckon you must be tellin' the truth. That's just about what might be expected to happen to a man with your luck! I was a damn fool to ever hook up with you in the first place!"

The gambler turned, put out the light, quickly stepped into the hall. Hardluck listened to the fading clatter of his boots on the stairs.

Hardluck felt a weakness in his knees. He groped for the bed in the darkness, sank down wearily. After a few minutes he heard the sound of a horse in the street below and knew that Makin was leaving Bachelor's Gulch forever.

It had just occurred to him that if he had been anybody in the world except Hardluck Jones, a man to whom misfortune and bad luck had a habit of happening, he would be lying on the floor near the window—dead! The thought amused him. Yes, you might say he was a very lucky man indeed. . . .

Oil and Cows Don't Mix!

With all the cunning of a coyote, with all the deadly viciousness of a striking tarantula, those oil-mad renegades sought to bring bloody destruction to that once rich and peaceful cattle range!

You won't want to miss Max Kesler's hard-hitting, action-jammed novel of the battle for oil—

"Those Black-Gold Prairie Pirates"

— Also —

"Death To The Outlaw Freighters!"
by James Shaffer

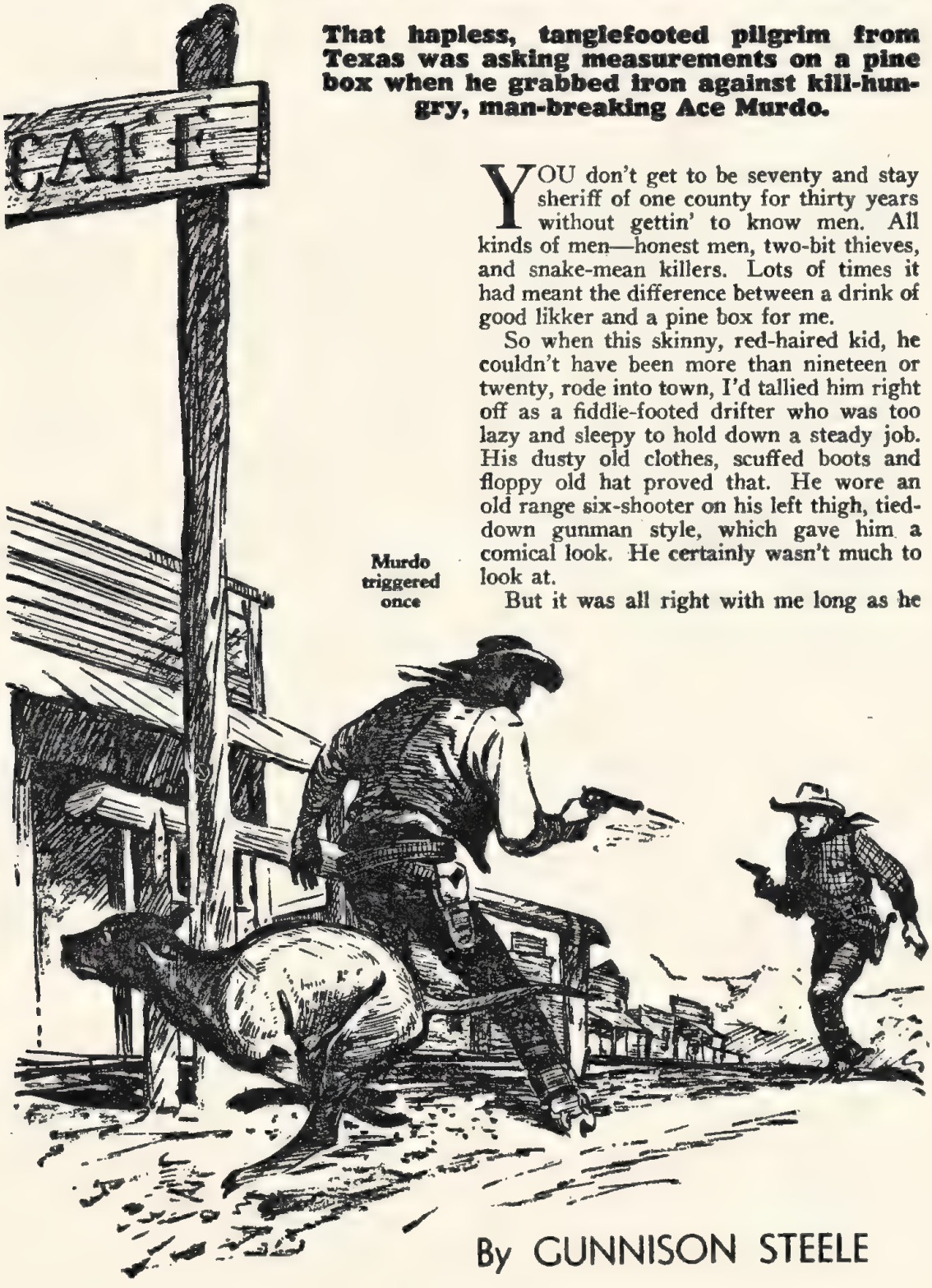
15c .44 Western MAGAZINE

Plus other thrilling sagas of the West That Was, by Joseph Chadwick, Tom Roan, Harold F. Cruickshank, Harrison Colt, and other Western writing hombres.

Get your September issue today at your newsstand!

Hell-on-the-Hip!

That hapless, tanglefooted pilgrim from Texas was asking measurements on a pine box when he grabbed iron against kill-hungry, man-breaking Ace Murdo.



Murdo triggered once

YOU don't get to be seventy and stay sheriff of one county for thirty years without gettin' to know men. All kinds of men—honest men, two-bit thieves, and snake-mean killers. Lots of times it had meant the difference between a drink of good likker and a pine box for me.

So when this skinny, red-haired kid, he couldn't have been more than nineteen or twenty, rode into town, I'd tallied him right off as a fiddle-footed drifter who was too lazy and sleepy to hold down a steady job. His dusty old clothes, scuffed boots and floppy old hat proved that. He wore an old range six-shooter on his left thigh, tied-down gunman style, which gave him a comical look. He certainly wasn't much to look at.

But it was all right with me long as he

By GUNNISON STEELE

didn't sponge off anybody. Besides, I was worried about "Ace" Murdo. Ace Murdo was a big, dark gent, who hung about the saloons most of the time, gambling and drinking. Ace had killed a puncher two months before. And he'd been acting up again lately, drinking a lot and talking big. He bragged he was gettin' man-hungry.

Everybody figured Ace was building up to a killing, and they walked soft when he was about. For Ace was fast with that fancy silver-handled gun he wore. Too fast for me, I knew, for the years had slowed me.

I knew I'd have to do something about Ace Murdo pretty soon, but I'd kept puttin' it off. When I tried to run him out of town it would be either him or me. I had him tabbed right—a gent who got pleasure out of killing.

Well, this carrot-topped kid loafed about town a few days. He didn't tell anybody where he came from or his name. Just loafed, drinkin' a little, and kept to himself. Nobody'd heard him say more than a dozen words. Sometimes he'd saddle his flea-bitten old roan and ride out into the hills. But he always came back.

One day a delegation came into my office.

"Mulehide," they told me, "you got to do somethin' about Ace Murdo. He's over in the Pronghorn, pizen drunk, and he's liable to kill somebody. He's takin' over the town."

I said I'd see about it, and after a while I got up and went over to the Pronghorn. The place was mighty quiet. Only two men stood at the bar. One of them was Ace Murdo. He had a glass of whisky in his hand and I could see the wickedness in his black eyes.

Standin' beside Ace, sippin' a glass of beer, was the red-haired, seedy-looking kid! It was plain he didn't realize the danger he was in.

As I went between the batwings, Ace Murdo turned quickly, and his elbow jogged against the kid's The redhead's beer sloshed out onto the bar. But some of Ace's whisky spilled, too, out over the front of his blue silk shirt.

"Blast you, kid" he snarled, "what you mean bumpin into me like that?"

"I didn't," the redhead denied mildly. "It was your fault—"

"Like hell it was! Lookin' for trouble?"

The kid swallowed hard. But his eyes had narrowed and his lips curled down, and for a minute I thought he aimed to call Ace. It would have been suicide, and I got set to let Ace have it from where I was.

Then the kid shook his head, said, "No, I'm not lookin' for trouble, mister. Maybe it *was* my fault. I'm sorry."

"You ought to be!" The kid's apology didn't seem to pacify Murdo. "You skinny, spavined little skunk. Gimme that beer!"

He grabbed the glass of beer from the redhead's hand and dumped it into a cuspidor.

The youngster swallowed hard again, said weakly, "I—that's all right. I promised Maw I wouldn't take drink anymore, anyway."

"Yella!" Ace sneered, and slapped the redhead across the face. "Kid, you got just ten minutes to get out of town. If you ain't gone by then, I'll kill you!"

"Mister," he said hoarsely, "I reckon you're makin' a mistake. Did you ever hear of the Lightnin' Kid? I—"

"Sure, I've heard of the Lightnin' Kid!" Ace Murdo stared in astonishment, then roared with laughter. "What's more, I've knowed him for three years. Last time I saw him was in Taos, two months ago. Chain-lightnin' with a hogleg, the Kid is."

"I'm glad you know that. Because I . . ."

"You locoed little runt!" Ace hollered, cuffin' the button again. "You got a gall, tryin' to scare me by passin' yoreself off as the Lightnin' Kid. I ought to shoot you, right now. But I'm givin' you ten minutes to leave town. Git, cuss you!"

The shabby redhead looked at the floor. Then he turned and shuffled out of the Pronghorn. Feeling kind of sick inside, I followed him out. He was shuffling toward the livery where I knew his old roan was.

"Kid," I said, as I came up with him, "you better get a move on. Ace Murdo ain't bluffin. Get out of town, fast!"

"I'm leavin' town, all right," the redhead said, not even looking at me. "But not because Ace Murdo said so. And not until them ten minutes are up."

"What?" I yelled. "You're crazier even than I thought—which was plenty, you figurin' to pass yourself off as the Lightnin' Kid. Maybe you nor Ace Murdo hadn't heard it, but I happen to know the Lightnin' Kid was killed in a gun-fight down in Crys-

tal City two weeks ago! Now, dammit. . ."

"I knew about it," the youngster agreed. "But I figured if I—"

The kid didn't say anything else, so I stopped and watched him go slowly on toward the livery. When he went inside, I crossed back to my office. I knew I had to face Ace Murdo in just a little while, and I needed a drink from my own private bottle.

I looked at my watch and saw that the ten minutes were up—and just then I saw the redhead lead out his saddled roan. But, instead of climbin' into the saddle and ridin' like he should, he dropped the reins and walked out to the middle of the street.

Ace Murdo was kind of swaggering. He was grinning, an eager, wolfish grin. His fancy raiment and silver-handled gun gleamed in the sunshine.

Murdo's silver gun was like a flash of light as it cleared leather. Its muzzle snaked up.

The skinny kid's hand didn't seem to move, but there his old six-shooter was in his hand Lead and red flame bawled from its muzzle, as he fired three times, the explosions were so close together they seemed almost like one.

Ace Murdo jack-knifed and fell forward into the dust.

I loped out into the street. The kid was calmly shoving fresh shells into his Peacemaker. He had gone back to the roan and was climbing into the saddle when I came up to him.

"Dag-nab it, kid," I stuttered. "Y-you don't have to leave town now. You done it—you beat Ace Murdo!"

He looked uneasy. "You aimin' to arrest me for it?" he asked.

"Arrest you?" I nearly swallered my chawin'. "Blazes, no! The town'll want to give yuh a medal. What's yore name?"

"Smoky," he said. "Smoky Peaks, from Texas."

"But this other business—you tryin' to make ever'body believe you was the Lightnin' Kid. . . ."

"I never," the scrawny redhead denied, gathering up his reins. "What I was tryin' to tell Ace Murdo—and you, too—was that I'm the gent that *killed* the Lightnin' Kid!"

TALE OF A TEXAS PIG

IN THE early 1840's, the Republic of Texas was in its usual condition of financial embarrassment, and was struggling desperately to conclude a deal with France whereby that country would take a mortgage on the Texan public domain. But the antics of a precocious porker brought disaster instead.

The downward trend of Franco-Texan relations really began when the French Charge D'Affairs chose to reside near a Mr. Bullock. Mr. Bullock, a giant of a man, took a keen dislike to the rather effeminate Frenchman and also to the diplomat's stable of blooded horses. Mr. Bullock was sure those shiny coated beasts were as sissified as their owner appeared to be.

Mr. Bullock kept pigs. They were not pedigreed pigs—just snorting, odiferous grunters. For some strange reason, Mr. Bullock's pigs didn't seem to share their owners dislike of the Frenchman or his horses. In fact, Mr. Bullock's pigs were forever adding pounds to their frames by augmenting their regular diet at the feed boxes of M. de Saligny's horses.

M. de Saligny's hostler was hard put to it to keep the omniverous porkers away from his charges. But day after day he would find them snuffling among the horses feed, some even, in typical porker fashion, getting right in the feed box, looking like they were trying to rub in what they couldn't eat.

One day the hostler, in fine Gallic temper picked up a pitchfork, and jabbed it into one of the robber-pigs. With his squealing, grunting charge, he strode to the fence separating M. Bullock and M. de Saligny, and dumped the stuck pig unceremoniously in Mr. Bullock's back yard.

Mr. Bullock, a man of some temper, took umbrage at the attitude of his foreign neighbor, and forthwith confronted the charge d'affairs with a bill for the premature pork chops. With haughty disdain, the Frenchman threw back at M. Bullock a bill for the feed the pigs had stolen. M. Bullock lost control of his temper, and proceeded to alienate diplomatic relations by whaling the daylights out of M. de Saligny and the hostler.

The following day M. de Saligny appeared at a conference with the government of Texas looking much the worse for wear. He preemptorily asked for his passport, said the negotiations were very definitely off, spun on his heel and marched out of the conference.

So Texas stayed in hock, Mr. Bullock had baby pork chops, the Monroe Doctrine was intact, and the population of that frontier country breathed a sigh of relief. The idea of a loan on their public domain from France had been far from popular. A movement even got under way to strike a statue to the pig that had brought about the collapse of negotiations.

—J. G. MacCormack

MAN-KILLER!

By

JOHN C. ROPKE

The four-footed death and destruction in the black killer-stallion damned Owen Lukon forever as an outcast among his saddle-mates.

THE big chestnut stallion had been motionless for some time now, only the soft swish of his tail, as it snaked through the knee high gamma grass, giving evidence that he was not some giant statue.

But Owen Lukon knew from bitter experience that the chestnut was most danger-

ous when he was quiet. He leaned slightly forward, his hands resting lightly on the saddle horn. His long legs, sensitive antenna that were tuned to catch the slightest tensing of the stallion's muscles, pressed more firmly against the sides of the animal.

But if Owen's attention was centered on the stallion beneath him, he had not forgotten the half-wild herd of mustangs that grazed a quarter mile to the north. He listened to the sound of the bells from the bell mares, recording the slow progress of the herd as it moved across the moonlit valley floor.

Ordinarily Owen would have been circling that herd at a slow walk, singing one of the mournful prairie lullabys that seemed to soothe the wild ones. But tonight he was mounted on King, and he was afraid to get too close to the herd.

Owen never knew when the big chestnut would explode into a bucking, sun fishing ball of fury, and he didn't want it to happen near the herd. The ruckus would probably stampede the herd to hell and gone.

Owen had been in the saddle since before dawn, and he was tired. It was this very weariness that had prompted him to ignore the protests of his buddies back in camp, and ride King instead of Roman Nose, his easy going well trained cow pony.

With Roman Nose he might have dozed, or fallen asleep in the saddle. And in this section of the Montana hills, where the big cats were numerous, a night wrangler couldn't afford to relax.

Mounted on King, that possibility was eliminated. The big stallion was constantly aware of his rider, could sense the slightest lessening of alertness. To relax would have been fatal.

Young Owen was keenly aware of his responsibility in guarding the herd. This was his first trip to the wild horse country, his first taste of long hours at hard riding in trailing and capturing the wild ones. Hard work in treacherous mountain trails, while the blazing Montana sun absorbed the last dram of vitality from a man's body. Hard work that wouldn't be paid for until the herd was delivered to the agency for the Rodeo at Helena.

Now, Owen's long legs caught a slight tremor of bunched muscles from King's body, and he gripped the reins more firmly, and checked the herd with a quick eye. The herd was still grazing quietly, and Owen sighed softly, surprised at the way he had tensed.

King's ears were forward, his head up, his quivering nostrils sniffing the slight breeze. And then Owen saw what was arousing the stallion's interest. Some distance to the west of the herd, a lone horse was grazing. The animal looked big, bigger than any horse Owen had ever seen before, but Owen knew that the moonlight had a way of magnifying things.

The horse was walking slowly toward the herd, nipping the gramma grass with indifferent interest. King snorted, shaking his great head in annoyance, rattling the bit chain. He stamped nervously, and Owen patted the stallion's powerful neck.

"Easy," he cautioned softly, "easy boy. He's coming back."

King stopped champing the bit at Owen's soft voice, and he watched the lone horse move toward the herd. Owen chuckled and settled back in the saddle, watching the wind waves roll across the top of the grass. His mind, as usual, contemplated the future.

Out of the fifty odd head of horses out there on the valley, only a few would bring any real money. Bill Miles, who had been trailing the wild ones for years, had told Owen that. Miles had been selling bucking horses to the Rodeos for ten years now, and when he spoke of horses, men listened.

The real good bucking broncos could only be found in cat country, Miles had explained. Bucking was a horses only way of fighting when a big cat landed on his back, and the bucking instinct of the wild ones in cat country was stronger than that of horses from the plains.

But the big herds were petering out. It was only this section of Montana's bad lands where a few could still be found. But as Miles had said, only a few would bring big money. The rest, half hearted buckers that would be good for only a few rides, wouldn't bring more than fifty dollars a head.

But Owen hadn't shared Miles' feeling of disappointment. He had ben elated at the prospect of being one of five to share in the profits the herd would bring. It would be far more money than he had ever had before. Enough to go into partnership with Steve Carlson, on that horse ranch he was going to start.

KING tensed suddenly, and Owen dropped out of his dream cloud. A high, shrill scream of pain from the far side of the herd snapped him up in his saddle. He yanked angrily at the reins to keep King from fighting the bit, and he stood up in the stirrups to study the herd.

Then, on the still night air, Owen heard the faint thud of hoof on bone, followed by another scream of pain. He gave King his head then, letting the animal race across the valley.

By now the whole herd was frightened, and in their confusion they kept together, milling about, getting in each others way. Owen was halfway to the milling bunch when he saw a great black rear suddenly and paw the air with heavy fore hooves.

A small boned mare tried to fight her way from the milling herd and ran into one of the black's flailing hooves in her excitement. Bone crunched and she went down, her sleek coat surf-boarding her across the dew wet grass.

Then the herd broke, heading south across the valley toward the hills, in a scattered bunch. Owen had to change his course slightly to avoid their wild charge, and the black saw them coming. Owen cursed his stupidness as he saw that the black was the same horse King had drawn his attention to a short time before. And Owen saw now that it wasn't the moonlight that had made the black appear big—he was big.

For a long second the black stood facing them, and Owen was sure he was going to charge. Then suddenly the black wheeled, and, neck outstretched, he thundered across the valley in the opposite direction of the stampeding herd.

It took every ounce of strength in Owen's tired body to pull King to a fighting, rearing halt. For a precious second Owen hesitated, then decided to ignore the black and go after the herd. Already they were distant moving shadows, speeding across the valley floor.

Owen urged the chestnut after them, but King had other ideas. He kept rearing, waltzing in circles, trying to go after the black. He stumbled suddenly, and Owen managed to slip from the saddle before King fell heavily on his side.

King rolled and pushed himself erect before Owen could slip into the saddle. But Owen had held the end of the reins and now he dug his heels into the ground and fought to hold the stallion down.

He was still fighting the chestnut, the ground rutted from his digging heels, when the four rannies from camp, awakened by the thundering hooves of the stampeding herd, pulled up beside him.

Tears of anger were streaming down Owen's dirt stained face, his clothes clung to his hard body in sweat-stained patches, and he seemed unaware of the presence of the others.

"Damn you," he kept sobbing over and over. "Damn you."

Bill Miles, the oldest of the group, pulled his gun and kneed his mount to the side of the crazed stallion. Without emotion he struck King between the ears with the barrel of his gun, and the horse went to its knees, stunned. When he struggled erect again, all the fight was gone out of him. He stood with head down, his great body trembling.

Miles ignored the stallion, stood up in his saddle and looked over the valley. Of the whole herd, only the mare whose skull had been crushed by the black, was in sight.

Slowly, Miles settled back in his saddle and turned to Steve Carlson. "Well, Steve," he said wearily, "I reckon that does it. I had a feeling about that chestnut. I knew he'd give us trouble sooner or later. We should have shot the damn killer the first day the kid brought him into camp."

Steve, his thin sandy hair hanging down over his forehead, shrugged but made no comment. But Owen saw the dull misery in the man's eyes and he winced inwardly.

Steve was no longer a young man. A back injury, received when he was a top rodeo rider, was giving him a lot of trouble now. Sleeping on the damp ground on the open prairie wasn't helping it any.

This was to be his last trip after the wild ones. He would have enough money then to start a little ranch. Often, when the rest had rolled in their blankets for the night, Steve would sit before the fire and draw crude sketches on the backs of can labels, of the buildings he would erect for his new ranch.

Steve realized the big herds were thinning out. Soon there would be a shortage of good bucking stock, Steve used to say, then the rodeos would come to Steve Carlson's ranch to buy top notch horse flesh.

"Yes siree," Steve often said, "I'm a gonna raise me the orneriest, buckinest bunch of hoss flesh in the west!"

And he had agreed to let Owen come in as a full partner when Owen got his share of the herd. Now, neither one of them would realize that dream.

Owen licked dry lips and faced Miles squarely, his hand still holding King's reins. "You got it wrong, Miles," he said defensively, "it wasn't King who stampeded the herd. It was some big black, never saw him before. Looked like one of those Belgian breeders to me. He slipped into the herd and began raising hell."

"Big black, my eyebrow!" someone said from behind Owen. "We've all been telling you for weeks to get rid of that chestnut. He ain't broke, an' never will be. Trouble with you, kid, is you're too cock sure of yourself. Won't take no advice. Think you know it all."

"Damn right," another agreed heartily. "He's too big for his pants. Us working our fool heads off, and just when we're ready to pull stakes, him and that crazy horse of his gum up the works. Hell, it might be weeks afore we round up them horses, maybe never."

THE accusing words trailed off, and a sick silence fell over the group. Owen tried to say something, but his tongue seemed glued to the roof of his mouth. He knew if he did get to talking he'd bust out bawling. His eyes pleaded with Steve Carlson for understanding, but the sandy haired ranny looked away. "I'm sorry," he said softly, "I told you to get rid of that chestnut. He's no good, Owen; he's just plain ornery."

In the embarrassed silence that followed, everyone seemed to find something to look at that was not in Owen's direction. But when Miles cleared his throat, they all looked at him attentively. Miles shrugged and forced a half smile.

"Well, kid," he said gently, "what's done is done. There ain't no use crying over a dead calf."

His smile vanished and he became serious. "I ain't sayin' I don't believe this yarn about this phantom horse of yours, kid. But I've been through this county a dozen times and ain't never laid eyes on any big black. But that's water under the bridge, we'll forget it. I know you feel as bad about it as we do—worse mebbe. But we don't want that chestnut in camp. *You* can stay on if you like, but that damn killer has to go before it causes more trouble."

Owen saw nods of agreement from the rest, and he bit his lips in disappointment. From the first time he had seen King, leading his wild bunch down a mountain pass, he had been in love with him.

King wasn't all mustang, his body was too big, his intelligent head too small. Owen had stayed away from camp two days waiting at that pass until King had led his bunch back. Then by pure luck, Owen had caught him.

Now, as Owen looked from Miles to the quiet stallion, he knew he couldn't give him up. Sure, Owen admitted mentally, the stallion had spirit, too much maybe. He raised hell every time he was mounted, and snapped ugly teeth at the hand that offered him food.

But Owen didn't see him as a killer. Ornery, sure, but that was because he was so much horse. King had a fighting heart, he wasn't the kind that gave up his freedom without a struggle. And that made Owen love him all the more.

Now, his calloused hand tightened possessively on King's rein, and he squared his broad shoulders. He faced Miles but his words were loud enough for all to hear.

"I'm plum sorry about what happened," he said, "sorry as hell. I'd gladly give up my share of the herd if it would help get them."

He swung the reins over King's lowered head and stepped gracefully into the saddle.

"But it's like I said, it wasn't King's fault that the herd stampeded. That big black walked right. . . ."

He paused, seeing the frowns on the faces before him. "Reckon me and King will move on," he finished lamely.

He kneed the horse forward and headed back to camp to pick up his gear. And even as he rode away, he kept hoping they'd call him back.

IN THE days that followed, King seemed to realize that any show or cussedness on his part would be met with punishing reprimands. His young rider, instead of singing and talking to himself while in the saddle, rode in sober silence.

Owen was in the saddle at dawn, and by sunset King was leg weary from covering miles of rocky, mountain trails. In three days of hunting, Owen had failed to sight even one of the stampeded herd. There was plenty of horse sign, fresh tracks at watering places, and on one occasion Owen found the half eaten carcass of a young colt.

Twice in his wanderings, Owen had sighted members of his late camp, and on both occasions the distant riders gave no sign that they were aware of his presence. They either didn't see him or pretended not to. But Owen chose to believe the latter.

Late the third afternoon, Owen couldn't stand the suspense any longer. He left the hills and draw of the upper ranges and rode back to the lush valley. The camp was still there, and Cliff Morgan, a young ranny about Owen's own age, was a half mile from camp wrangling a small bunch of six horses. And three of those were the bell mares that the camp had brought along to settle the wild ones. Owen knew then that the camp had had little better luck than his own.

Purple was washing over the valley as Owen neck reined King back into the hills. His confidence and determination were at ebb tide, and the soft racing shadows seemed to reflect his mood.

The first night he had left camp he had been confident of locating the stampeded herd without trouble. And mounted on King, the fastest horse in camp, he had anticipated little trouble in rounding them up.

Now he wasn't so sure, and the thought of spending another night in his lonely camp depressed him. He missed sitting around the fire with Steve Carlson, discussing the possible future of the ranch they had intended to start.

A small ranch at first, one that just the two of them could work. Then later, in a few years maybe, they would branch out. And from where Owen sat he couldn't see that ranch now, and it wasn't because of the sudden darkness that closed over the hills.

IT WAS late morning of the next day when it happened. Owen had let King pick his trail the whole morning, letting him go where he wanted to go. The country was not entirely strange to Owen, he had covered this section of the hills with Miles some weeks before. There had been nothing here.

Now, as King skirted a small valley, his pace quickened with sudden interest, and he started down into the valley. Owen pulled him back sharply. The entire area of the valley couldn't have been more than a half mile in radius, and even a good sized dog would find difficulty in hiding himself in the scant brush.

King started down again and Owen cursed and swung him around, his dark mood of the night before still on him.

Suddenly King exploded, dropping his head between his fore legs, his hind hooves reaching for the tree tops. The suddenness of the move caught Owen unawares and he catapulted over King's neck and landed face forward in a thick patch of wild berry bush.

Owen had let go of the reins to protect his face as he hit the brush, and now, as he scrambled to his feet, he saw King trotting down into the valley. A sudden rage gripped him and he trotted after the animal, throwing rocks at the chestnut's retreating rump.

King disappeared behind a curve in the trail and Owen stopped, panting curses. He sat on a boulder beside the trail and waited until the brooding rage left him. Then he followed the stallion down into the valley.

The valley floor was covered with horse sign. Droppings, some of them fairly recent, were everywhere, and it dawned on Owen that the inch high grass had been cropped by horses.

King was on the far side of the valley, trotting along the base of a high wall, running with his head to one side to keep from stepping on the trailing reins. He stopped suddenly, facing the wall, and he neighed shrilly.

Owen had completely forgotten his anger now, and for the first time in days he forgot his troubles. Here, in this open valley, he was sure he would find the key to finding at least some of the stampeded herd.

He watched King with interest as he started across the valley. King was still facing the wall, shaking his head angrily, stamping disapproval. Twice, while Owen watched him, the animal looked as though he were going to walk straight into the wall, but each time he stepped on the

trailing reins and stumbled. Owen swore.

Owen was fifty yards from the stallion before he saw the narrow cleft in the rocky wall. It cut in at a forty five degree angle and was unnoticeable from any distance.

At the entrance to the cleft, where King fretted, the ground was hard packed from the heavy hooves of many horses. And Owen, as he came closer, saw why King hadn't gone through.

The opening was barely wide enough to let King through, and it was impossible for King, holding his head to the side to avoid the trailing reins, to enter.

King didn't even seem aware of Owen's approach, and made no attempt to escape when Owen reached for the reins. Even when Owen tied the animal to a dead cottonwood, the animal had eyes only for the entrance to the cleft.

Owen was shaking with excitement when he studied the opening at closer range. The smell of horse was fresh and strong, and Owen saw tufts of shaggy hair on small outcroppings of rock on the sides of the pass.

Owen drew his gun as he entered, fearing to meet some charging animal coming out. It was, Owen saw a perfect trap for some cat who was intent on dining on tender horse meat. Once started through the pass, there was no way to turn around, no way for a horse to go but forward.

About twenty feet in from the opening there was a sharp turn in the cleft and the light became dim, the sides of the pass almost invisible. But in another twenty steps the light became stronger, and with a suddenness that was surprising Owen stepped into a small cave that was bright with light.

There were crude markings on the wall of the cave, and in the corner a crumbled hill of stone that might have once been a stone fireplace. Owen forgot horses for a second, his mind toying with stories he had heard of ancient tribes of Indians who had once lived in these mountains. The cat people they had been called.

There was the smell of dampness in the place, and Owen caught the faint trickle of running water. Then, through the pass behind him, he heard King's shrill neigh and he moved to the mouth of the cave cautiously.

And what he saw from the mouth of the cave made him leap back quickly and melt into the shadows beside the opening. He removed his hat quickly and very carefully eased his head around the opening.

He looked into a small tea-cup valley, dotted with full bodied maple. There was a small edge in front of the cave with a wide trail, almost a path, sloping gently down into the valley whose level was a good twenty feet from the ledge.

There was a small lake at the far end of the lush valley, and Owen gazed dumbfounded at the two hundred odd head of horses that stood in, or at the rim of the lake.

Then Owen saw the big black. He stood like a giant statue on a rise of ground a short distance from the water, his magnificent body outlined by the surface of the sunlit lake that was his backdrop.

He was facing the cave, and Owen had the odd feeling that the black was watching him. Owen eased back slowly then, his body trembling with excitment. He was in such a hurry to return to the outer valley that he forgot the turn in the pass and walked into the wall.

He got a nasty cut on the forehead for his carelessness, and blood trickled in a steady stream from one nostril. But Owen didn't seem aware of his hurts. He was trotting as he came out of the pass, and he began a feverish search for boulders with which to block up the pass.

IT WAS after sunset when Owen hit the valley floor, the camp fire of Miles and his crew, a winking eye in the distance. Owen urged King with a dead run and raced across the valley floor.

Wind whistled in his ears and he gulped, fighting for breath. He saw figures rise from the camp fire and circle to the far side of the flames.

Slowly the men on the other side of the fire holstered their guns, then they caught something of Owen's suppressed excitement and they came forward eagerly.

"I found the herd!" Owen blurted in a rush of feeling. "The whole damn lot of 'em. Got 'em bottled up in a small valley couple of miles from here."

He paused, watching the grins of surprise spreading across the tired faces before him. "And what's more," he added jubilantly, "I got that black stallion with them. The black I told you about."

The boys were crowding forward eagerly then, shooting questions at him, shaking his hand. Everybody was laughing, slapping one another on the back.

"Hey," Owen yelled suddenly, "I almost forget to tell ya. There's about two hundred head in that damn herd I got bottled up. A whole mess of new ones, mares mostly, the big black's harem."

There was a second of silence and then everybody was whooping and yelling like a band of attacking Commanches. Hats sailed toward the blue Montana sky and Steve Carlson kicked the coffee pot into the fire.

Cliff Morgan, who had been night wrangling the small bunch, rode into the circle of light, his face painted with curiosity.

Steve nearly pulled the man from the saddle in his excitement. "You hear that, Sourpuss?" he yelled. "Owen done rounded up about five hundred head, mebbe more. All buckers too, real hell raisers!"

The men were still jubilant, but Owen, now that the fever of excitement had passed, was scared. What if the black had another way out of the valley? Owen hadn't checked that. Suppose the black battered down the barricade? It had seemed strong enough at the time, but now Owen wasn't sure.

But one worry, at least, was forgotten when Owen led the group to the cleft opening. The barricade was still up. The men sat around smoking until the sun drove the night mist from the valley, then they scrambled over the barricade and followed Owen through the narrow pass.

They didn't pause in the cave as Owen did, but moved past him and pushed through the opening, bunching on the ledge. They halted suddenly, staring in silence at the valley below, and Owen knew fear.

But the horses were there. Grazing on the left side of the valley. Owen spotted the black and knew he had seen them. The horse shook his head angrily and his challenging scream filled the valley.

A soft command from Miles sent them all back into the cave, and in silence they all followed Miles through the pass. As soon as they reached the outside valley, Miles began drawing plans on the ground with a stick, making preparations for rounding up the whole herd.

The timber barricade wasn't quite finished when darkness fell, and Miles ordered the fire to be built near the cleft opening. Fire, the men knew, was as good as steel bars where horses were concerned.

None of them had slept the night before, and their eyes were tired, bloodshot from lack of rest. But they sat for hours before the fire in silence, each one telling what he would do with the money they received when the herd was delivered to the Rodeo.

But once in their blankets they fell asleep almost immediately. Their heavy snores drowned out the soft crackle of the fire, and finally the embers slept, their brightness dimmed by a grey covering of ash.

It was still night when a shrill scream of rage woke Owen from a sound sleep. He pushed up in his blanket, supporting himself on one arm, then he snapped fully awake.

But even as his hand streaked for his gun he knew he was going to be too late. The black stallion was standing on his hind legs above Miles, a crazed look in his insane eyes. Owen's gun was only half out of his holster when something hit the black from the far side and the killer crashed on his side into the half dead fire.

Cliff Morgan had seen him coming and had rolled far enough to one side to avoid being hit by the flailing hooves. Then King was rearing, his hobbled fore hooves coming down clumsily on the black's head.

Miles was up on his feet now, his deeply tanned face a sickly smile. His gun bucked against his palm and the black's weak struggles ceased. But it was some time before the men were able to pull King away from the giant corpse.

* * *

It wouldn't have been so hard if Miles hadn't given so damn many orders. "Easy, men," he kept saying, "take it easy now. Don't hurt that chestnut."

As if he had to tell them that, Owen thought! Hell, every one of them were handling King like he was a sick baby. Owen knew right then that there wasn't a one of them who wouldn't give his whole share of the herds profits for the gallant stallion.

"Man," Steve Carlson grunted with admiration, "what a stud we got fer that ranch of ours, huh, kid?"

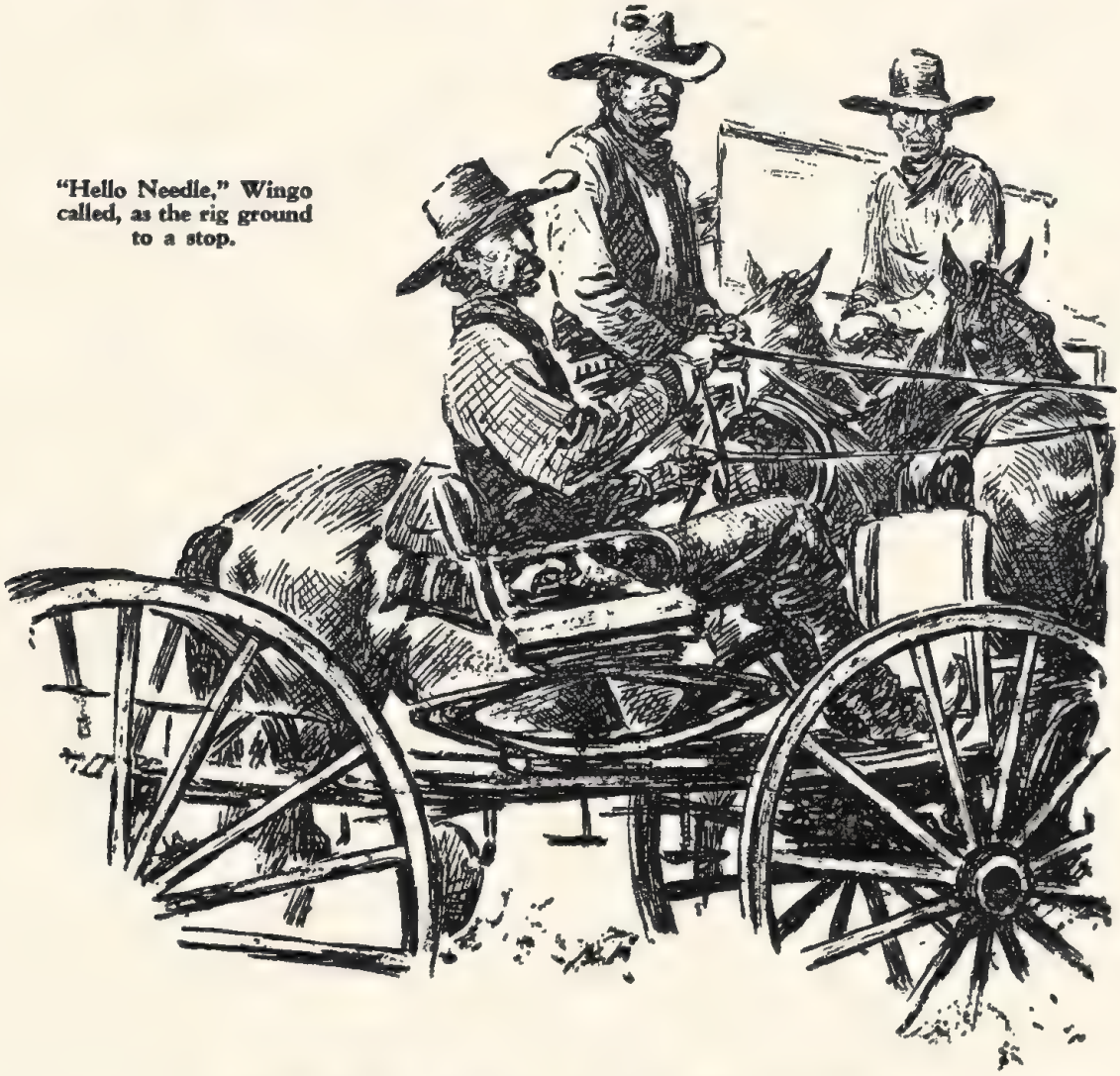
• • WHISKEYTOWN'S

When the gun-wise pilgrim who called himself Lucky Wingo rode into that bushwhackers' paradise, the welcoming committee whipped up a real Winchester greeting for him — served with blood-and-bullet sauce, red-hot from the Devil's fry-pan!

CHAPTER ONE

Lucky Dave Returns

THE sloping Wyoming sun was low on the rolling bald hills, when the West-bound stopped long enough to let him down at Prairie Bend with a suitcase in his hand, while the baggageman dropped off two big and battered old cow-



"Hello Needle," Wingo called, as the rig ground to a stop.

Smashing Story of Old Wyoming

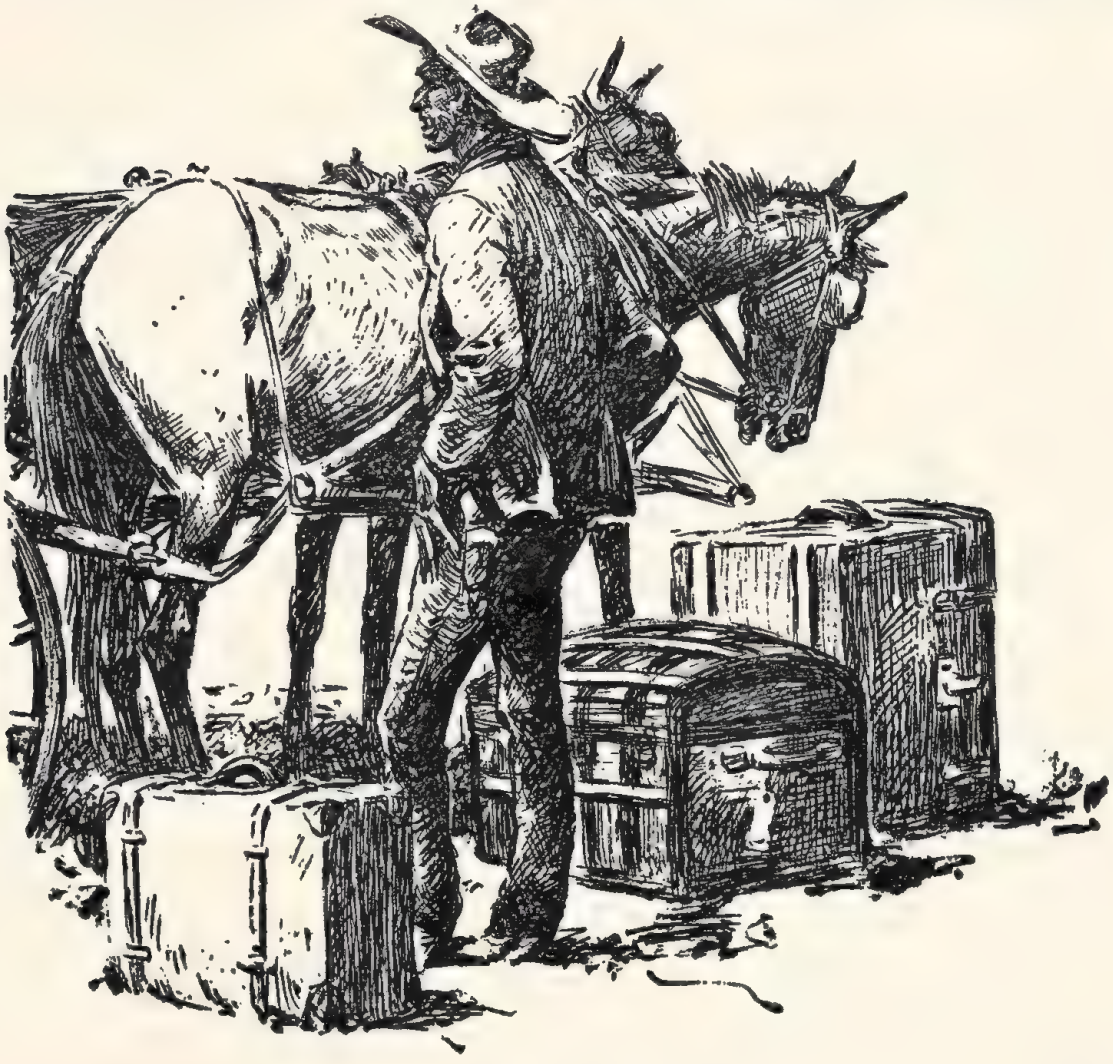
By TOM ROAN

hide trunks in the weeds on the north side of the tracks. It was a God-forsaken place, if the paint-scabbed depot and the lopsided general store on a rise beyond it meant anything.

Even the cattle pens, south of the rusty sidetrack, looked as if they were ready to give up the struggle. He was a man dropped off at Nowhere and left to shift for himself. A long, lean man of twenty-six in gray tweeds, the big white hat and the tan boots the only things to brand him as one who might have some connection with this wide and rolling land.

But he wasn't alone. Four men were on the porch of the general store, two of them old and gray, perched in board-patched chairs at either side of the wide doorway. The others were big and dark, standing at the top of the leaning steps. A rather flashy pair in their big white hats, one with a shirt as red as a flame, the other yellow as gold. A pair of lean saddle horses waited at the old hitchrack below.

Leaving his suitcase, he walked along the track until he came to the trunks, seeing that the ground was even enough for a buckboard to get to them. When he turned back he saw that the two big men had come down from the store and were leaning against a corner of the window-broken old depot as if waiting for him. The man in the



red shirt spoke first, in a snarling voice.

"Yuh figger on stayin' here, dude?"

"Maybe." He stopped a dozen feet from them. "Why?"

"How long?" The red-shirt ignored the question by popping another. "We're doin' the askin', yuh see!"

"Looks like it might be for some time." A dry little smile flicked its way across the newcomer's face, a twinkle appearing in the mild blue eyes. "Otherwise I might have stayed on the train."

"Another'n comes through in an hour." The red-shirt nodded westward. "Goin' the other way. Maybe it'll take yuh back. This ain't a dude country, mister, an' we don't stand for 'em—not unless we know all about 'em an' are sorter expectin' 'em"

"Are you the law out here?"

"Sure, both of us!" The yellow-shirt answered him, patting the butt of a black Colt at his right hip. "Wanta make somethin' of it?"

"Not exactly." The newcomer looked on past the general store, up along the foothills of a great ridge, trying to ignore this pair of trouble-hunting bullies, but they were not to be ignored. The yellow-shirt spoke again:

"I'm Ribber Welch, an' my pard here is Digger Malone. The names may not mean much to dudes, but they mean a hell of a lot out here."

There was no hint of a smile on the newcomer's face now, and the mildness had faded from his blue eyes. "I'm not looking for trouble, but if that's what you want, you can damned soon have it. As to how long I intend to stay here, that's none of your business."

"Tough, huh!" The yellow-shirt's eyes had widened. "Plum insultin' in yore lip, too. Ever do any dancin', mister?" Again that big right hand reached downward, the red-shirt a little quicker. "We like that kinda stuff in Prairie Bend."

"Then try some of it." The newcomer's voice hadn't lifted. A pair of long six-shooters beaded with silver and gold had come from somewhere to fill his hands. "When roosters get mean and crow too hard you usually clip their spurs."

It was the fastest thing that pair of bullies had ever seen. Two shots roared almost as one. A silver-plated spur on Ribber Welch's right foot flew to one side, the strap breaking as a bullet hit it squarely on the shank. Digger Malone staggered as he felt the left heel of his boot go from under him, both men jarred from head to foot. The next two shots were right between their feet. With a yell they wheeled and ran for it, limping as they ran.

Up on the porch the two long and lean old men had come out of their chairs and stepped forward to stare. Old Lem Parker and Mark Bond had been here nearly forty years, and were still hanging on to their general store. They were trying to keep from grinning as Welch and Malone came stumbling back up the rise, both blowing like winded horses.

"Damn! He wasn't no damn mute! He—he's got the quickest draw I ever saw!" He jerked up his foot. "Wouldja look at what he done to my spur!"

"An' my heel!" gasped Malone, lifting his foot. "Hit it an' it flew from under me like a bullet itself! We shore picked on the wrong fella that time, Rib!"

"Kinda sorter thunk yuh was gonta." Old Lem Parker answered him, his throat dry as he reached up and scratched at the thin stubble of gray beard on his chin. "Yep, kinda sorter thunk it."

"Yuh know 'im?" Digger Malone glared at him. "Who'n hell is he, anyhow?"

"Lucky Dave Wingo of Saddle-Rock Valley." He jerked his head toward the tall ridge. "Left here 'round six year' ago as one of them fancy shooters for some big back East cartridge company."

"*Lucky Dave Wingo,* huh?" Digger Malone turned, eyes owlish as he stared at Welch. "I think we'd better be gettin' over the hump to Whiskeytown!"

"Might not be a bad idea at that, boys." Lem Parker was scratching that bearded chin again and looking up the slope of the ridge. "Seems as how I see Needle Sharp an' a couple of the Saddle Rockers comin' for Lucky now in the buckboard."

The two horses snorted at the hitchrack as they were swung away from it and headed up the trail at a fast gallop. Now Lem Parker and Mark Bond relaxed, Parker grinning from ear to ear.

"An' now that he's back," he nodded, "I'm awonderin' how he's gonna act an' feel when he hears about Whiskeytown."

"Just what I was wonderin', too." Bond turned back to his chair. "Somethin' tells

me he ain't gonna like a lot of things 'round here. I wonder if he's changed much."

"HI-YI, Lucky."

"Hello, Needle!" Wingo moved forward eagerly when the buckboard ground to a stop. Needle Sharp kept to his seat, long old talons of hands still on the reins. At the right front wheel Wingo stopped, then laughed. "Still not shaking hands with people, I see!"

"Nope, never done it, don't ever aim to start it." Something like a ghostly little smile moved the wrinkled lips covering his big, horse-sized store-bought teeth. "How the hell are yuh!"

And then he came down over the wheel with the agility of a goat to grab Wingo by both shoulders, give him a shake, the old lips parting to a horsy grin.

"Where'n hell wuz yuh, takin' so long to get here? It's been nigh to a year since we buried Whiskey Jim!"

"It took a long time for your message to come through, Needle. I was in Africa."

"Africa!" Needle Sharp's pale old eyes seemed to bulge forward in their sunken sockets. "A'mighty, Lucky, yuh started hittin' the bottle like that too!"

"I wasn't drunk, Needle." Wingo was laughing at him now. "A circus took me over there, and I decided to stay and look around."

"Yore daddy done that, too, yuh know." Sharp's look of surprise changed to another grin. "Went clear hell back yonder to New York to see the sights five year' 'fore yuh was born, then he decided to take 'imself a boat an' go on down to New Orleans. Like the rest of the Wingo tribe would do," the smile widened, "he got drunk an' got on the wrong fool boat. Cost yore mammy a cold thousan' to get the critter home."

"Get his trunks an' the suitcase!" ordered Sharp, giving him a poke with his thumb. "We've gotta get home."

They loaded the trunks, and stopped at the store on the rise. Both old men shook Wingo's hand, but there was something strangely stiff about it. Mark Bond went to the door several times and looked out while they were buying a couple of sacks of potatoes and three boxes of groceries from a list Sharp had in his pocket. Not until they were driving on up the slope of the ridge did Wingo mention it.

"Yo'll soon know." Sharp looked at him with a frown, then tapped the grays with his buggy-whip. "Of late, Lucky, it ain't so often helpful to a fella to be too friendlyish, even if he is yore friend. Yuh noticed how Mark kept goin' to the door, just keepin' his eye peeled. Say yuh had some trouble with Malone an' Welch?"

"None to speak of," shrugged Wingo. "But why all the mystery? What's this that I'll soon know?"

"Just wait an' yo'll know."

And that was all that would come out of old Needle, until they had reached the high crest of the ridge and were able to look down the long slope into the great valley on the north side. Saddle Rock Valley lay in front of them, many miles long and at least a dozen miles wide, a winding river coming down the middle of it, curving like a snake, towering cottonwoods along its banks.

The old Saddle Rock outfit was to their left, and the houses, sheds, barns and corrals on the other side of the river. Wingo's eyes were on it for two or three minutes, thoughts busy. Whiskey Jim Wingo, his father, had cut those logs for the houses from the virgin timber along the river—in the days when hostile Cheyennes rode the range and a man had to work with one eye on the job, the other alert for Indians.

"Well," Sharp cleared his long, lean throat gently, "yuh ain't seed nothin' yet to sorter gouge yuh?"

"No, not— Well, yes, I do see something!" Wingo had glanced down the river to the west where the timber was heavier. "It looks like a town down there!"

"An' is," nodded the old man. "That's Whiskeytown, an' ever house asettin' on Saddle Rock range, Lucky."

"But how did that get started! And when!"

"Five year' ago, close to it." Sharp tightened up on his lines to ease the grays over a rough little dry wash in the trail. "Whiskey, 'imself, fit like hell to stop it, but yuh can't fight a federal judge an', of course, he lost out. They found silver in the valley, Lucky."

"Silver!"

"Yep, silver." Sharp sighed. "An' plenty hell with it." Something that might have been a grimace tightened his old mouth. "There was a big rush, just as always, gam-

blers an' honky-tonkers flowin' in on the heels of them what woulda been honest enough, I guess Overnight there was the tents agoin' up, the fiddles an' the banjoes aringin', feet apoundin' out Hell Among the Yearlin's on the new-plank floors. Yuh just can't stop a silver or a gold rush. Ten times worse'n tryin' to head off stampedin' cows runnin' ahead of a blizzard. There's more'n six hundred people in Whiskeytown now, an' yesterday—it bein' Sunday an' me gettin' 'round as usual—I hear that there's some hint of a fella findin' gold."

"But we own every foot of that land down there!"

"Shore, yuh do!" Needle Sharp chuckled now. "Ever foot of the land, what's on top, what yuh can see, some bought outright from homesteaders yore daddy got to file on a lot of it. But," he scowled now, "I wonder how many homesteaders go to the bother an' all that of settin' right down on their haunches an' readin' them deeds when they look so hellish important, signed by the great president of the United States, 'imself."

"Go on!" Wingo nudged him half-angrily. "Get to it, Needle! You were always hell to keep a fellow waiting."

"All right, all right!" He winced as Wingo jabbed him with his elbow, "Don't cave in my ribs. Them damn deeds I was atalkin' about give yuh just the top of the ground. The politickers reserve the mineral. Maybe the homesteader has a right, or thinks he has a right, to six feet down for a grave, but that, I reckon, is about all. If they diskiver mineral in the mound above yuh, then up yuh can come—an' off to the hawgs or the coyotes for all they give a damn about it. Now take me . . ."

"Keep you for yourself!" cut in Wingo, still staring at Whiskeytown in the distance. "They discovered mineral, they filed on it, and that's the story. Who named it Whiskeytown?"

"Oh, that!" Sharp shrugged. "Them in power down there don't call it that. Only the local cow servants an' such call it Whiskeytown. To them others it's Little Silver, all ashine an' aglitter like Heaven itself, only they just ain't got around to pavin' ever-thing with silver. Ribber Welch an' Digger Malone are back there long 'fore now, an' Cadimus Calver knows that Lucky Dave Wingo's back an' they'll maybe have to kill him just as they killed his daddy.—Now what'n hell's that?"

They were getting close to the river and sudden shots had sounded ahead, the reports appearing to come from the old Saddle Rock houses.

"Get outa here!" Sharp shook the lines and brought the whip down on the backs of the horses. "Quit yore pokin' along!"

They forded the river a short time later, the old man giving the grays no chance to stop and drink, then they were climbing the steep trail that would bring them to the top of the cliffs. The shooting had ceased after two wild bursts, and the silence held on ahead of them until they were rattling up to the old hitchrack in front of the house.

Even now it looked as if there had been no trouble here as Wingo leaped down over the wheel and hurried on into the house. He passed through the big living room, then into the long lean-to kitchen and dining room. A fire burned in the old range to his right. The long table to his left had been set, an aroma of cooking filled the room.

"Hell, wouldja look at that!"

Flip Brace and Hash Hardy had galloped on and around the house and were now out of their saddles. When Wingo reached the door both were staring at the limp figure of a man lying on the ground with a growing pool of red forming around him.

"This is murder." Hardy's voice was like the low grinding of rock. "Old Butch Larkin was too damn nigh blind to fight anybody, an' somebody's shot 'im down like a mad-dog."

CHAPTER TWO

Death Rider

BUTCH LARKIN was a man Wingo had never seen. He was a relic of the ranges and the cow camps from Canada to Mexico. No longer able to stand the hard work of the range, Sharp had taken him in here as a slow handy man about the house and corrals, giving him his grub and a place for his blankets in the bunkhouse, along with a few dollars a month for his tobacco, a shirt and a pair of pants now and then.

"Jim Wingo woulda done it, an' I knowed yuh wouldn't care, Lucky." Sharp's voice was husky as he tried to explain.

"Butch wouldn't hurt a fly. As Hash said, he was too near blind to fight. Too near blind to really earn his salt around a place, but yuh know how it is. The Saddle Rock never turned any man away."

"But who would kill an old man like this!" Wingo's face had gone white from the moment he had looked at the gray-bearded ghost Hardy and Brace had turned over on its back. "Hell, this couldn't be anything but cold-blooded murder!"

"An' mighty common these days in Saddle Rock Valley," nodded Sharp, staring now toward the corrals. "Here comes Wai Yuen. Maybe he can tell us somethin'"

They had forgotten the old Chinaman until that moment. Now he was appearing from the corrals where he had been in hiding. Too excited to recognize Wingo for the moment, he came up to them at a run, pointing to a heavy stand of timber five hundred yards behind the house.

"Slix men!" he sputtered. "Slix men! I go corral. Big barn. They come. Blutch talk. Two men," he held up his fingers, "go kitchee. Me scared. Keep back. They shoot Blutch. Him no gun. Me hide in hay. No fine me. They go."

They got it out of him a little at a time. Six men had simply ridden out of the timber, each armed with a six-shooter at either hip and a rifle balanced across the lap. After a minute's talk the two had gone into the kitchen, making a quick search of the house, then one of the men keeping apart from the others had said something in a sharp voice and had pointed across the river, the guns beginning to blaze immediately.

"An' that tells it, I reckon," growled Sharp. "Yuen saved 'imself by crawlin' like a rabbit in that big haystack. They woulda found 'im in time, but they didn't have time. The rat keepin' to one side saw us acomin'. He wasn't smart or he wouldn't had the others shoot down Butch before they located the Chink. Just some more terror work, Lucky."

"And that's my home-coming greeting!" Wingo was still staring at that heavy timber. "Is this how Dad died?"

"They dry-gulched 'im comin' outa Wolf Canyon." Sharp pointed to a break in a wall of mountains on the north side of the valley "I guess it was just 'fore sundown. Wolf is where we have to keep what stock we've got left, countin' the rustlin' of a few head at a time by the night riders what . . ."

A scream cut him short, a bullet driving into the roof of the lean-to. Instantly they were wheeling and heading for the kitchen, Wai Yuen letting out a wail of fear. As good as helpless with only a pair of six-shooters here, Wingo followed them, heading straight on for rifles he knew he would find on the walls of the living room. Hash Hardy alone followed him, also snatching down a rifle. As they raced back into the kitchen they saw that Sharp had slammed the door and had himself spread-eagled against it.

"Don't be a fool, yuh two!" barked the old man. "It'd be just what they'd want! Yo'd be in the open an' . . ."

"Great Harry!" Flip Brace's voice was a yelp as he stood crouched below a window near the stove. "Looks what's acomin'!"

A tall black horse was coming out of the timber. In the saddle, tall herself, rode a dark-haired girl with a big white hat on the back of her head, the rest of her clothed in shiny black. Across her lap was a rifle, the long and slender barrel catching the light from the lowered sun and flashing like a blade of fire.

"Who is she?" Wingo pushed Sharp away from the door and flung it open. "And where did she come from!"

"She's what her name says, I guess." Needle Sharp took but one look. "She's Ruth Darlin', an' some say she from Heaven."

"An' Sam from Hell," half-intoned Hash Hardy, looking out a window to get a clear view of the girl as she came out of the last of the low trees. "Sam Darlin's the new deppity U. S. marshal out here, an' they say there's bets goin' the rounds—six to one anywhere—that he won't last long agin the Whiskeytown crowd."

The girl was coming right on, and Wingo moved forward to meet her, passing the body of the old man on the ground. He was three yards from it when he halted, waiting for the girl to come up, watching the way she sat her saddle and knowing her as a born horsewoman. His hat was in his hand despite the sharp question he fired at her the moment she came to a halt.

"Did you fire that shot that just hit the house?"

"I'm afraid I did, and I came on to apologize." She was frank, wide-open about it, and as pretty as hell if he knew anything about women. "I —well, I'm afraid I was excited. I ran into my first wolverene up there, the ugliest, meanest looking thing I ever saw. I killed it and my bullet must have come on. I couldn't see the house until I came on up to it and—Lord," her flashing dark eyes widened as she looked on past him, "what in the world has happened here! Don't tell me—"

"No, you didn't do it!" He jerked up his hand. "It was done well before you spotted your wolverene."

"But—but," her eyes were still wide, "it looks like Old Butch Larkin!"

"And is, they tell me."

"But who would want to harm him!" Handling Lucky her rifle, she swung quickly out of her saddle. "The old fellow was almost blind!"

"They tell me that, too." He turned and looked at the body, Sharp, Hardy and Brace still keeping to the background. "You see, I've been away quite a long time and just came in. I'm Dave Wingo, Miss Darling."

"Lucky Dave?" She thrust out her hand. "I've heard a lot about you since we've been here."

"And I heard a lot about you a few minutes ago." He was half-smiling now. "It seems that somebody hit the nail on the head."

"Hello!" cut in a voice from the northwest corner of the house, a man on a long bay appearing "What's goin' on here?"

"Howdy, Sam!" Needle Sharp answered him. "That's Lucky Dave Wingo talkin' to yore gal. On the ground there lies Butch Larkin, what's left of 'im. Looks like he had enough lead poured through him to stop six grizzly bears."

Sam Darling was small and entirely unimpressive, everything about him but his black eyes appearing to have been faded by the sun and wind. His badge hung lopsided on a gray calfskin vest, the white hat battered. Even the Peacemakers at his lean hips looked as if they should have been thrown away years before. He walked with a limp in his right leg as he piled down, giving one side of his drooping mustache a twist before he spoke to the girl.

"Hello, Ruth! What'n hell yuh doin'?"

Sharp again answered him, "Guess it was just a cold, damn mean kill to impress Lucky that he'd better get in line an' stay in it."

"An' not carry on with that suit. Yuh tell 'im about it?"

"Well,—no, I ain't had time." Sharp rubbed his chin. "Yuh can't do ever' damn thing in a minute, Sam. I—"

The marshal cut in. "Yuh never get nothin' out under a week. Well, I can tell yuh, Wingo. Yore daddy was goin' to make them Whiskeytown jokers pay for the top of the land they're asettin' on, which is his right, an' that's why he was killed. This mess fixed here for yuh," he waved his hand toward the body of Butch Larkin, "was to let yuh know what's comin' Wai Yuen was just lucky enough to be outa the way, but they're still goin' to try to get 'im, knowin' that he can point them killers out in a crowd. I—Say now," he had glanced down the river, "here comes Death Rider an' who'n hell sent for him!"

Wingo had to stand and stare now. Drawn by two lean black horses, a long black vehicle was coming. On the high seat, sitting tall and straight, a tall black stovepipe hat fitted squarely on his head, was the driver, a lean scarecrow like his horses.

"Death Rider an' his hearse!" grunted the marshal. "He allus knows when there's a chance of pickin' up a dead man somewhere, an' maybe it's right here that I'm goin' to find out somethin'."

"HOWDY, folks, howdy!" Death Rider's voice was hollow when he pulled up his rack-o-bone blacks. To Wingo he was like a ghost, garbed in his dead-black except for a once-white shirt with a tall rubber collar sawed around his neck, a frayed black string-tie dangling. And so thin a puff of wind might have blown him away. He smiled at them, ill-fitting store-teeth long, broad and dark. "Purty evenin', the shadows beginnin' to let down so gentle. Allus kinda saddenin'. Sorter like a beautiful girl dyin'."

"Hello, Rider." Sam Darling's voice was a growl as he moved back along the tall, skinny horses and came to a stop at the left front wheel of the hearse. "What brings yuh here?"

"Just adrivin' an' alookin'." Rider tied

his lines around the foot brake and moved over to let his long legs come stretching down until he was on the ground beside the marshal. "Whut's that on the ground? The body of a man, Darlin'?"

"Yep." Darling half-smiled. "One of them bodies, Rider, yuh come here to get. Wai Yuen's ain't quite ready for yuh yet."

"So there's two, eh, an' so there's two!" Death Rider's dark eyes gleamed, appearing to push forward in their sunken sockets. "Well, well, ain't it awful that a man's born only to die. Born in sufferin', goin' through life sufferin', an' sufferin' at the end. The Al'mighty musta tooken a mighty stout mad on at Adam an' Eve.

"Who told yuh, Rider," cut in Darling quietly, "that yuh was gonna find a couple of dead men at the Saddle Rock?"

"Huh—er—what?" .Rider's lean-claw hand fell from his chin as if somebody had knocked his arm limp with a club. "Why—uh—why—"

"I axed." Darling's voice was flat. "I'm waitin' the answer."

"Why—uh—why," Rider tried to grin again, "a sort of a little bird. Yeah, a sort of a little bird."

"An' I'd like to know the name of that little bird." Darling had taken a long, wicked looking black quirt from his saddle horn and it was dangling now like a snake from his right wrist. "Who was it?"

"Listen, Sam Darlin'," Rider poked a long, dark finger at him, "when a man's an undertaker he don't have to give the names of them what give him the places to find his clients."

"Clients!" Sam Darling's eyes widened. "Hellfire, yuh mean to stand there an' tell me yuh call the carcass of a man a client?"

"Shore, now, shore!" A hollow cackle came from Death Rider. "The undertaker, now, calls anything a client what'll put a dollar in his pants. What'n hell's it to yuh, anyhow?"

"Painful to me as it ain't gonna be," the marshal stepped closer, "I had an idea I was gonna do this. "Fact is, thought about it the first time I saw yuh ridin' that dead-hack so high an' mighty."

And then it was happening, so quickly, so furiously a little scream came from the girl as she covered her face and rushed for the kitchen door. Sam Darling's left hand had shot forward, closing on Death Rider's lean left wrist. There was a sudden twist, a jerk and a push, Rider's arm being brought up behind his back. Before a man could blink he was half-drapped across the front wheel of his hearse.

Sam Darling's right hand swept up the long black coat tails, pinning them under the captured arm. Then the quirt was in action. The first lightning slash carried the sound of a rawhide popping against old and dry saddle leather, Rider squirming, trying to get away, but the marshal holding him in place, the quirt lashing again and again until six furious strokes had been whipped across the upturned black seat.

"Damn, now, damn!" wailed Rider. "I say that hurts!"

"Ain't doin' it just for fun." The quirt shot up again. "Painful as it ain't, I still wanta know the name of that little bird."

"But—but yuh can't do this to me!"

"Who told yuh, yuh was gonna find dead men at the Saddle Rock?" The quirt started falling again, the dark old ghost squirming, moaning and yelling but unable to get off that wheel. "I wanta know his name, if it won't be too much trouble to yuh, *Mister* Rider."

"I—I'll tell yuh!" Death Rider was wailing like an old woman now, the tears streaming down his dark-leather cheeks. "Shore, I'll tell yuh!"

"LET up there an' ever'body reach!" The new voice was a boom from the northwest corner of the house, as shocking as a shot, and a big, square-shouldered man of forty-odd had popped into the picture.

"I'm Mark Lude, the marshal of Little Silver!" he boomed again. "I said reach—an' make it high!"

"As if yuh would have to tell me!" Sam Darling had stepped back, letting go of Death Rider's wrist "I can smell a polecat at a mile, but ain't yuh a little outa yore territory, Lude, 'way up here?"

"Not by a damned sight!" Other men were appearing behind Mark Lude now, six-shooters filling every pair of hands. Almost at the same moment others were appearing around the opposite corner, weapons covering everything in sight. "Cadimus Calver has reset the town limits. They now run a full six miles up an' down the valley."

"An'," leered Darling, "wasn't that right nice of Cadimus Calver! But," he scowled, "I wonder what yuh an' yore wolf pack think yo're gonna do here buttin' in on my business, an'—"

"That's easy, Darlin'." Whiskeytown's marshal grinned now. "Plum quick explained. I'm takin' the whole damn bunch of yuh here right on into town with me an' lockin' yuh up. Let 'em down if yuh will!" His big, dark hands tightened on the shotgun. "It'll give me the best excuse in the world to blow yuh down."

"An' wouldn't yuh like that!" Darling started to walk slowly toward him, then stopped when he saw the gang at the opposite corner, an old wolf here in a trap with death grinning at him from either side. "Looks like we got so interested in *Mister* Rider we forgot about ever'thing else."

"Yuh would, yuh damned ol, bully!"

"*Bully!*" snorted Darling. "Yuh call me a bully when yuh bust ever' common drunk yuh pick up! Any excuse'll let yuh wham a man over the head with a six-gun, then stand an' kick the guts outa 'im when he's down an' out cold. What'n hell makes yuh think yo're gonna take us to town an' lock up the whole push?"

"This, for one thing!" Mark Lude's right hand came back from the trigger-guard long enough to pat the stock of his shotgun. "For another thing, there's a dead man there on the ground. That's murder, plain an' straight to me. It'll be that way to Judge Cadimus Calver an' the jury he's gonna pick to try this case."

"Meanin'," nodded Darling, "that we won't have the chance of a snowball in Hell agin his stacked crowd. Well, *Mister* Lude, I ain't right shore at the second that . . ."

"Stop 'em!" The bark-like yelp of a voice behind cut him off. "Them two's goin' in the house!"

"Drag 'em outa there!" bawled the marshal of Whiskeytown. "Catch 'em an' drag that girl out by the hair of the head if yuh have to drag 'er!"

Carrying both his rifle and the girl's, Wingo had moved back close to the kitchen doorway when the whipping of Death Rider had started. With Mark Lude coming around the corner Ruth Darling had reappeared to see what was going on. Now the two had suddenly stepped inside, Wingo slammed the door closed behind him.

CHAPTER THREE

Unlucky Thirteen

"TAKE 'er easy, Wingo, take 'er easy!" Sam Darling's voice was near-frantic by the time the door had closed and the bolt shot in place. "Let me handle this out here. All they want is an' excuse to kill yuh, Wingo, an' that'll make excuse enough for these buzzards to kill us!"

"Keep yore damned old mouth shut!" Mark Lude's voice was even higher, then he was cursing his men: "Go in there an' get 'em! Get in, I tell yuh, an' snatch 'em outa there! Kill 'em both if they try to show fight! Damn it, we're the law an' in our rights!"

"Shore, now, we're the law." The answering voice was saner, coming from close against the northeast corner of the house. "But it's already dark inside Mark, an'—an' along with that, that's Lucky Dave Wingo in there, one of the best trick shots, they say, that the West ever saw."

"Damn that!" Lude had already crouched low against the wall of the lean-to to be below a window, his shotgun still covering the dangerous old Sam Darling "Go in an' get 'im!"

"Yo're the head marshal of Little Silver!" Another man was now calling the marshal's hand. "It's sorta yore job, I'd say, to lead the way in. There's plenty of us out here to take care of old Sam."

"Come out, Wingo!"

"Tell 'im nothin, Wingo!" That was Darling again, the frantic pitch leaving his tone. "Don't say a word! There's still plenty of time an' light left for yuh to pick 'em outa their saddles if they start away from here with us!"

"I ain't skeerd! I'm comin' atter yuh, Wingo!"

That was from the big front room. A long, lean, hump-backed man had come across the porch, reached the doorway and had leaped inside, a cocked Colt lifted in each hand. Had there been light enough Wingo could have seen that his face was like chalk, but he was coming in despite his fear, hoping to make a hero of himself in front of the others.

Having dropped to the floor almost against the rear door, the girl slipped on and crowding into the corner behind the

stove, Wingo fired just two shots, one behind the other so rapidly that they sounded as one. The man in the front room yelled, slipped and fell on his face as he wheeled, and then he was gone, his cocked six-shooters tumbling on the floor, one going off with a yard-long flash that sent a bullet smashing into the fireplace. Like a bucking bull, the man was up then and going back out the door, yelling at the top of his voice:

"He shot 'em outa my hands! He shot both guns outa my hands!"

"Shore, now, an' didn't I tell yuh!" The man at the northeast corner of the house was shaken by a hysterical outburst of laughter. "One of the best, if not *the best*, trick shots born! Yuh still want me to go in there an' get 'im, Mark? Or—or," the laughter was lifting into a wild ass-braying, "will yuh kindly lead the way?"

"We'll go, but—but we'll be back!" Mark Lude was showing the white feather in front of every man but too scared to be ashamed of it. "But—but we'll be back. Yuh damn right we'll be back! I'll bring two hundred men with me the next time, Sam Darlin'."

"Go an' get 'em, Lude!" Sam Darling was laughing at him now, watching him back himself around the corner, all the strut and bullying gone out of him. "Meantime, I still wanta ax Mister Rider—Now where'n hell did Mister Rider go?"

Without all the rest of the excitement they might have heard him going. Seeing his chance, Rider had hopped up on his double-trees and snatched down his lines from the foot brake. Turning the hearse slowly, then throwing the whip to his lean horses, he was heading back toward Whiskeytown, the old blacks suddenly running for all they were worth and Death Rider still crouched like a long-legged monk on the double-trees, the high body of the hearse his protecting wall from a bullet that might come flying after him.

Once Mark Lude had made up his mind to turn loose from everything here, the others were no slower than old Death Rider. They had left their horses at the edge of the river, down there at the foot of the blue-gray cliffs. Now they were scurrying for the footpath down to the water, and from the front door fire started licking at them, bullets making the gravel and bits of earth fly from under the racing feet until the last man was gone, the yells half-filling the valley.

"Keep atter 'em!" yelled Darling. "Boy, that's what I call shootin'! Wouldn't trust myself to try it. I'd find myself bustin' 'em straight home an' gettin' forever done with this mess."

Grinning from ear to ear now, the girl trailing him with the rifles, Wingo ran on to the rim. A glance below showed him that it was all confusion. Two men had been unable to stop and had landed waist-deep in the river before they could turn back, wade out, and then climbed into their saddles like scared apes. Others were already stringing out, hunched monks themselves over their saddle horns, spurs raking furiously, their quirts rising and falling, some still yelping—homeward-bound bravoes who had started something they had been unable to finish, the most of them cursing Mark Lude.

"MARK LUDE'S back in town. He's been downstairs waiting for you for more than two hours, Cadimus." Cadimus Calver looked at his caller a long time before answering him.

Dwarf Miller brought the news upstairs in the Silver Queen on the south side of the street.

Cadimus Calver would have made four of him. With hair like a yellow-maned lion, he was over six feet, looked a yard across the chest, and was known as a fighting man whenever men met him. Coming here more than a year ahead of Miller, he had already thought himself unbeatable when the little lawyer arrived, and then—waiting until they had a town on his land, Calver selling lots right and left—Sam Wingo had snapped back to life in a federal action to show that he still owned the top of the ground.

"And what did Lude accomplish?" The question came at last, after Dwarf Miller had slipped himself into a chair to the left of Calver's huge morris. "Anything?"

"Just what I told you!" It was coming, and Miller was never slow, especially when he was mad, and anger was written in his face now despite the mildness. "He came in and headed straight for Doctor Wall's office. One of the men had to help him up the side steps, thinking he had been shot in the neck. And he had been, in a fashion.

Wall took a piece of rock out of his skin. From what I can learn it was showered down on him from the cliffs when they were making their get-away. One man started them on the run—"

"Wingo?"

"*Wingo*!" nodded the lawyer. "That was one hell of a crazy idea of yours, Cadimus. It was a crazy idea to have Jim Wingo killed, for we are up against something here we can't beat."

"We can beat it if this damned younger Wingo's out of the way."

"You make me tired!" Miller came to his feet angrily. "Eight out ten—yes, damn it, nine out of ten!—of the people in Little Silver are against you. You've ridden them, hammered them, bullied them, selling a man a lot or a house one day and taking it away from him the next. There isn't a man in Wyoming in the gambling game who doesn't know that all your wheels are spiked or loaded like your dice, your cards are marked, your gamblers the most crooked to be found anywhere. And still you won't stop bullying!

"In comes this Sam Darling." It was the little man openly sneering and snarling at the big one now. "You take one look at him, you say he's nothing, you even laugh in his face. Well, Darling hasn't been asleep. He's been doing his work, quietly but surely, and he's now just about ready to snap the whip. When he does you'll hear the wolves howl and see them start falling on your neck."

"And my men'll take care of that!" Despite his sneer, Cadimus Calver's face had grown white. "A man has a right to protect himself, and especially a duly elected judge of—"

"Judge, hell!" Miller clamped his hard hat on his head and for a second it looked as if he was about to jump on him. "Everybody in town knows how you handled the voting. Cadimus Calver, you're no more of a judge than I'm a billy-goat!"

"I at least look more like one and less like a damned goat than you, you *damned dwarf!*" Calver was coming to his feet, uncontrollable rage beginning to get the upper hand of him to hide some of his fears. "Get the hell out of here and send up Mark!"

"You don't need to tell me to go!" Miller had moved close to the door and could laugh at him now. "I'm going, not merely out of here but completely out of town at the first opportunity, and I'll be riding a tall, fast horse. Now good-night—and go to Hell!"

Such a blow-up had never come from Dwarf Miller, and Calver stood there staring as the door was yanked open. He opened his mouth to stop him, but no words came. In a flash Miller was gone, the door slamming behind him. Another voice startled him:

"What is it, dear?"

He wheeled to his left and saw her then. It was his Red Rose Kate, red hair piled high, a red silk wrapper drawn tightly about her shapely figure. She was coming to him when he stopped her with a snarl and one of his thundering roars:

"Get the hell out of here!"

"*Cadimus*!" The woman retreated a pace, the wrapper slipping, letting one red-muled foot and half a leg flash. "What's come over you!"

"I'm mad, that's all!" He was catching up with himself as quickly as possible. "That damned little Miller wart! *That wart*!"

"You're scared, Cadimus!" She started back for him, arms lifting. "Tell me about it, honey!"

"Not now, Rose, please!" He lifted his hands. "I—I don't see a damned thing to get scared about, but—well, there's always something about that dwarf that comes true when he gets scared. And he didn't tell me all of it. No, by God, he's holding something back. I guess he's heard something. Maybe it's that old blind devil. Maybe it was a mistake." He was staring at the floor now, a man talking to himself, scared and wondering why he was scared. "I didn't know the fools would pour it into him. Damn it, why did I pick a jackass like Mark Lude to be marshal of Little Silver!"

"Sit back, dear, sit back in your chair!" Red Rose Kate caught him by the shoulders, pushing gently. "I tried to tell you. The dwarf tried. What is it that this Lude has on you? I've asked you that before—"

"And I'll kill you," he suddenly roared, "if you ask again! I told you nothing, absolutely *nothing*! Nobody has a damned thing on Cadimus Calver. That name's as clear as a bell."

"Then, you beast," she shoved away from him, the woman was snarling like a cat half at bay now, "how about *Victor Proctor*!"

"Don't call me that name!" He started for her again, hands lifted, ready for her throat. "*I'll kill you*!"

"But why!" Her scream filled the room, seemed to go through the windows and far across the river, stopping him again in his tracks. "If I have known it for months, why couldn't I keep on knowing it and hold my secret."

"Maybe—you're right." He turned back toward his chair like a dazed bull. "Yes, maybe you're right. We can go right on just as we were, nobody else knowing a thing about it. I'll kill Lude." He stopped, looking up at the ceiling. "Why I haven't before is a damned sight more than I will ever know. Go back to your room, Rose!" He threw up his hands. "I'll see you later."

Red Rose Kate had lighted a big lamp with a bright-red shade that had not had a blade of flame touched to it in weeks. It was already on a small table.

UP THE river a pair of old eyes stirred at the sight of that light. An old face pushed closer to the living room window, the eyes staring a long time to make sure. Then he was calling Wingo and Ruth, asking them to have a look.

"An' tell me," he cleared his throat gently, yet with a certain amount of tension, "the color I see."

"Red!" answered Wingo. "Bright-red." "What's there about it that makes you so excited, Dad?"

"Just a little job I've been workin' on for weeks." He grinned at them now. "I wanted to make shore. Made one mistake about it a couple of years ago an' picked up the wrong man. This time—well, that red light, if it is *red,* makes it certain. Guess it's about time we got some saddles on some ridin' stock. Yo'll stay here with Wai Yuen, Ruth. This ain't no woman's job."

Mark Lude was a long. long time in coming up, having gone back to see the doctor when the hole in his neck started bleeding again. And in spite of his nervousness, Cadimus Calver had dozed in his chair. The rap on the door finally startled him.

"Come in!" he barked, and in came the marshal, big hat in his hand, enough gauze and bandage around his neck to choke a horse. "Oh, it's you, you smart fool! Where've you been?"

"Back to the doctor's place." Lude let the door close behind him. "I got hurt. Been tryin' to get up here for hours. Dwarf Miller come up. I guess it was a whole hour 'fore he told me yuh said I could come."

The tumbling report of a shot downstairs stopped them at last, made them jerk tense. Calver's face went ashen. The marshal's mouth bagged open, eyes growing big and round, both men held their breaths until a woman screamed below.

"It's Sam Darlin' an' the—the Wingo fella!"

"I see them!" snarled Calver. "Think I'm blind!"

Cadimus Calver fell back with a howl of pain as a bullet struck him along the wrist, ragged its way up his forearm and smashed into the crook of his arm. His six-shooter fell. He sawed his left hand downward, but it never touched the butt of his second weapon. Another yard-long string of fire from below sent a bullet smashing through his elbow, and he went down, helpless now and howling in pain. A moment later he was cursing like a madman as he saw Lude and the popping eyed Welch and Malone lift their hands and start down the stairs, each yelling his fool head off.

"We quit! *We quit*!"

* * *

"Good work, Rose old gal." It was more than an hour after the excitement had died down before Sam Darling sat on the side or her red velvet bed, old hat on the back of his head, a cheap cigar in his mouth. "It took yuh a hell of a long time, but yuh come through."

"You said I had to be sure, and I was really sure only this afternoon." She was watching him intently, waiting for something. "Do—er —I have to go back to kansas and spend that eight months in the pen?"

"Nope," he shook his head. "That'll be settled, an' along with that yuh get a fifty-fifty split on that reward."

"Sam!" She was on her feet, leaping for him. "You darling!"

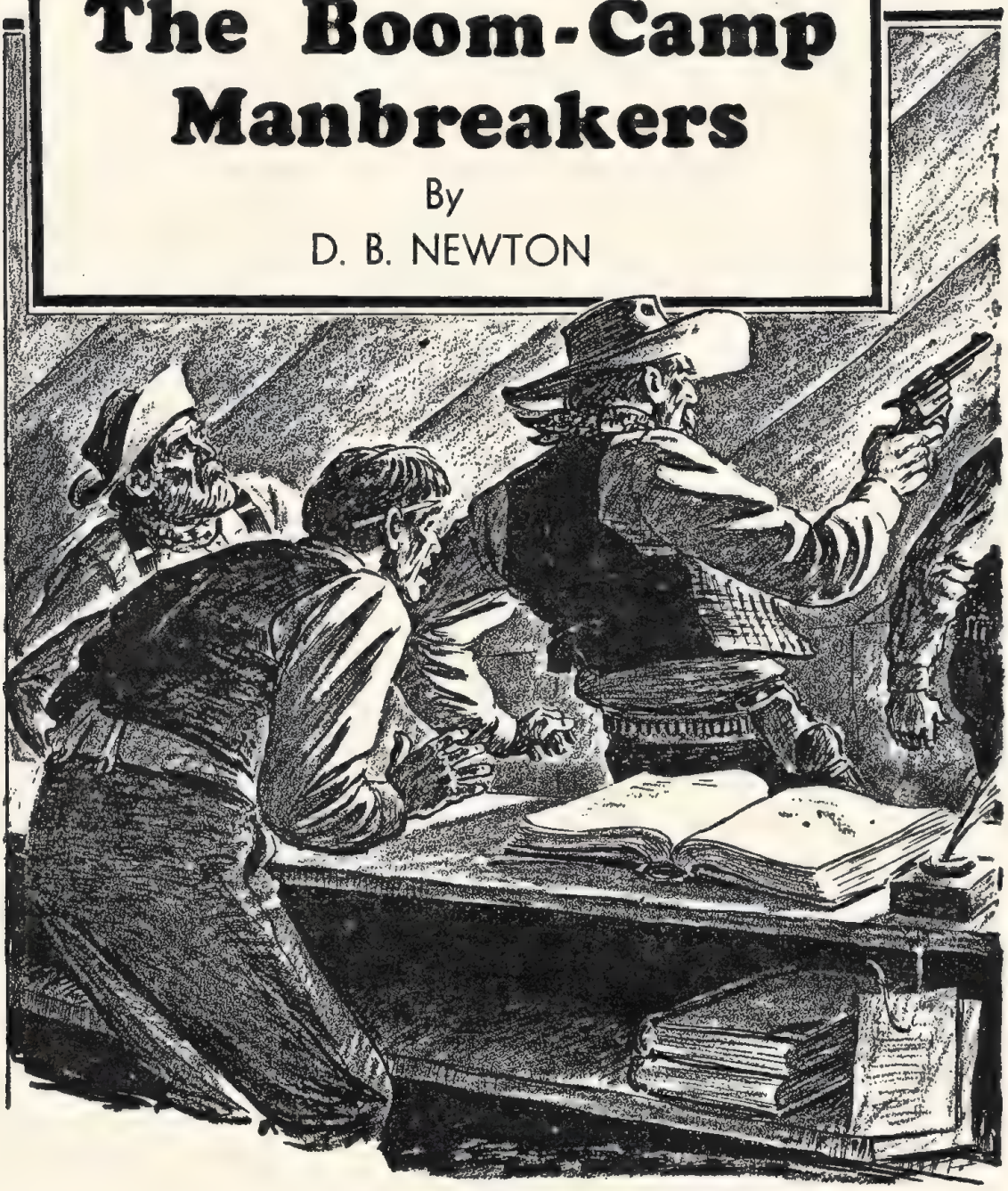
"Don't paw me!" He shoved her with a grin. "When I make a hoss trade I just make a hoss trade. Dammit-to-hell, I've got to go see where'n hell Wingo an' Ruth went."

THE END

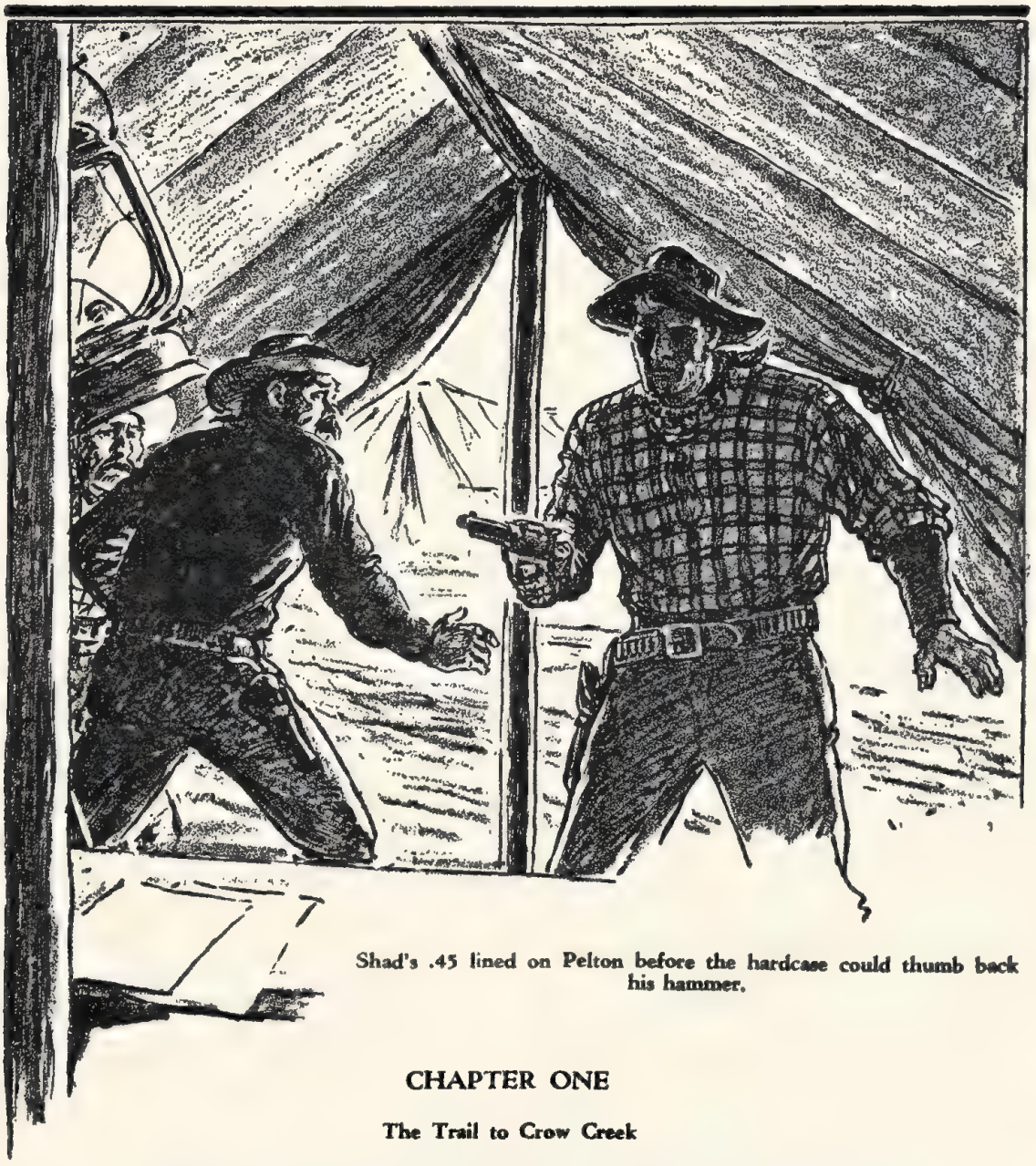
The Boom-Camp Manbreakers

By

D. B. NEWTON



As a gold-stampede samaritan, Shad Gurney assayed a hundred percent, when he took under his wing the dying tenderfoot. . . . Who could only repay his benefactor in the deadly coin of a claim-jump combine's snarling lead!



Shad's .45 lined on Pelton before the hardcase could thumb back his hammer.

CHAPTER ONE

The Trail to Crow Creek

SHAD GURNEY was high up the steep face of the ridge when he first suspected someone trailing him. The knowledge was disturbing. For a moment he wondered if Lance McCabe might have sent a killer after him; but then he figured that was a bad guess.

He moved in under the wind-twisted boughs of a juniper and eased his pack to the ground. There was no point trying to hide, because his own tracks, gouged from the unbroken knee-deep drifts, made the only mark on the dazzling snow field. But if his pursuer had any intentions of trying a long rifle shot the shadow of the tree would give a harder target.

Shad had a six-shooter in his holster, but he did not pull it out. He waited, quietly, and watched the dark figure as it toiled nearer up the steep pitch, head down in the effort of making progress through loose snow, putting his feet in the very tracks that big Shad's boots had dug. As he came closer, a frown of puzzlement touched the big man's heavy brow.

Suddenly Shad sang out: "Well, what's the deal, mister?"

The other stopped, whipping a startled look ahead. He blinked a little as Gurney came out of the shadow of the tree.

He was a small man, not young, with faded eyes in a brick-red and peeling face. The little fellow did not look particularly warm in the stiff new outdoor clothing he wore, and the heavy pack seemed to bow his thin shoulders forward. He was sobbing and panting from effort, and maybe from fright at the look of Shad Gurney's bearded face.

"Where you think you're going?" Shad demanded, roughly.

The other swallowed. "J-just over the the ridge," he answered timidly. "I was told this place they call Crow Creek lies beyond it, and I was looking for a short-cut."

"It's a hell of a climb for a shrimp like you!"

"Yes, I—found that out once I'd started. But I ran across the tracks you had made and then it was a little easier going."

Shad shook his head, staring his incomprehension. He had seen all kinds; doings like this Crow Creek strike always brought them out. But this little fellow, with "tenderfoot" written all over him, apparently had the brains to see the advantage of taking the ridge shortcut—and the grit to stick to it when he found the going tough.

"You must be damn set on getting in there," he remarked.

"Oh, I have to! I've got to get started before all the gold is taken out."

"Ever gone prospecting before?"

"No," the man admitted. "But I read all I could lay my hands on, and I got a lot of good advice before I bought my outfit."

Shad looked at the heavy pack. There was probably three times as much stuff as the man could ever use; some merchant back in a frontier jump-off town had sold him a bill of goods. Gurney shrugged, disgustedly. Another damn pilgrim, out to clean up in the gold fields and bound to go home dead broke—if he ever did make it back where he came from. He knew all about the type, from heartbreaking years of following the strikes across Colorado and Montana and Idaho.

He leaned, shouldered into the straps of his own well-balanced pack and jolted it a couple of times to get it riding right. He said: "Okay. I guess I can't stop you following me, but just be sure you keep out of my way. I don't want nothing to slow me down. I've got a late start as it is, and I aim to reach Crow Creek before all the decent claims are taken."

"Yes sir," the little fellow agreed quickly. "I don't mean to bother you any."

And Shad swung his back on him and started off again.

It was a punishing climb, a strain to heart and lungs, with unsure footing in the early snow that blanketed this high slope. The raw Fall wind was sharp here, buffeting. Shad Gurney lowered his head to it and plodded on, with powerful strides that lifted him steadily toward the knife-edge that was his goal.

The tenderfoot could never equal such a pace, even after Shad Gurney had broken a trail for him. When Shad glanced below a half hour later the little fellow was lost from sight and there was only the bare snowfield with its spotting of scrub growth, and the single thin scar plowed up by his own broad boots.

Evening was very near when Shad finally came up under the rim. And he didn't care to be caught on the treacherous descent of the other side, with nightfall coming in; impatient as he was to get down to the new strike, he found a sheltered niche under the tall face of a rock and there threw his pack. Juniper boughs made a small, hot fire. He hunched over it, cooking his supper out of the path of the wind—a big, blond, hard-bodied man, his bearded face showing the disappointment of a hundred futile quests for the gold that others always found.

He broke out his blankets, rolled into them, and dropped instantly off to sleep. Yet, contrary to his usual fashion, his rest was fitful. He came full awake at last with the stars big overhead, and the wind raking crystal streamers of the fallen snow past his

shelter. The fire was down. He threw more wood on it, and then sat wondering what it was that troubled him.

Then he remembered—the tenderfoot! He got up and stepped into the open. His own tracks were there, black under the starlight, but there was no sign that the little fellow had come that way. Shad Gurney stood a long time considering this, a frown on his stubbled face. He said, aloud: "Wait a minute, now! Just whose nursemaid are you?"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when he had started down the slope again, backtracking, and cursing himself.

INSIDE twenty minutes Shad found him. The tenderfoot lay in a dark huddle, at the base of a big, upthrust rock. "Now, what the hell happened to him?" Gurney asked himself. Then, turning the body over, he saw the bloody gash along his skull and figured it out.

"He slipped about here," he decided, noting where the snow was scuffed up in a long wallow, "and in falling bopped his head good and hard against the rock. Well, he's still breathing. . . ."

He knew there was only one thing to do. Shad loosed the tenderfoot's pack and slung the light frame of the man easily across his shoulder. He got him up to the fire without much difficulty, and went back for his trappings. He stowed them away with his own and then set to work to see what he could do for the hurt man.

He heated snow water, washed the blood out of the gash on his patient's head and bound it. About that time long, hard chills began to run through the little fellow's body, shaking him. His clothes were soaked with sweat and snow. Shad swore again and stripped them off him, covering him with a blanket while he wrung out the clothes and put them on sticks to dry before the fire.

Then he broke out his old, smoke blackened pipe and settled back to wait. The stars paled, trees and rocks and the ridge above them began to take on the form and the beginning colors of sunrise. Shad Gurney fumed impatiently. He should have been on the trail by this time.

The tenderfoot began to cough, weakly. "Dammit, he's gone and got pneumonia!" Shad muttered. There was black coffee boiling on the fire; he poured some in a tin cup and took it over and knelt by his patient. "Come on!" he growled. "Wake up and swaller some of this."

He held the man up while he drank, and then laid him back gasping at the strong, hot brew. Without his clothes the stranger was a puny spectacle, his undeveloped body that of a city dweller. Shad covered him with the blanket.

"Thanks, friend," the tenderfoot said. "You're very kind." He coughed again.

Shad sat back, growled: "Don't mention it! I'm having the time of my life, setting up here nursing you when I should be on my way to Crow Creek. There won't be a damn grain of gold left in the whole diggin's."

The stranger said: "I'm sorry! Why don't you go on now? I'll be all right."

Shad didn't move. He said, gruffly: "You got a name, I reckon. What is it?"

"Cross. Homer Cross—"

"Where you from?"

"I clerked in the same store in Indiana for twenty years."

Shad said nothing for a long minute. "Well, Homer, my boy," he declared, finally. "I tell you what you want to do. Find the quickest way to get back to that store and head for it. Because you'll not only lose your shirt on this haywire proposition—likely you'll get yourself killed into the bargain!"

The other started up, saying quickly: "Oh. I couldn't go back! You see—" He hesitated. "There's someone I'm—very fond of. She's a widow now, with three children. And on my salary at the store I couldn't hope to—"

"So that's it! In order to marry the woman and raise another man's kids, you'd chase gold rumors to this Crow Creek strike! Well, now I've heard 'em all!" Shad Gurney shook his head. "You're a damn fool, Homer!"

The little man had a quick pride. His ageing features gone hard, he exclaimed: "I won't bother you any longer!"

"Oh, set down!" grunted big Gurney. He didn't know what made him add gruffly: "I didn't mean to talk to you that way—"

That day passed, and another, and still Shad Gurney waited in the little hollow, up under the ridge while his patient combatted chills and fever from his exposure in the

snow. By the third morning, Homer Cross was recovered enough that he could stand, a little shakily. He smiled weakly at Shad, then, his windburned and peeling face tight with determination. "I can make it now, all right," he announced. "I won't have you wasting your time up here with me, any longer. . . ."

Shad had gone through the huge bundle of new equipment the tenderfoot had bought, showing him just what parts of it were essential and what could be discarded. The pack was now considerably less than half its former size; and when Gurney shouldered into his own pack once more he flung Homer's on top of it. The little man protested. "I can carry my own stuff all right."

"The hell you can," Shad snarled at him. "You'd fall on your face after ten minutes. . . . Now, let's start moving; and don't let me git too far ahead of you this time—I ain't for losing you in a snowdrift again!"

CHAPTER TWO

Sixgun Reception

HE WAS in a black mood when they came down, at last, to the strike at Crow Creek. In the time he'd wasted up under the ridge with the sick tenderfoot, it seemed that every goldseeker in the Territory had beat him in to the new find.

They lined the back of the muddy stream like ants, and others who had not been able to locate on the creek where the first color had been found swarmed the trough of the stream almost as far back as the steep rim which shaped its course. Sluice boxes and pans were hard at work, and shafts were being sunk. At one point a nameless city of tents had mushroomed into existence, its streets a quagmire of mud and melted snow that sucked at the thousands of pairs of boots that trampled it.

Shad Gurney scowled blackly as he shouldered through the crowded streets, the little tenderfoot fighting to keep pace with him. "Looks to me a hell of a lot like we're both out of luck, Homer," he said, finally. "They'll have had this creek picked clean by now." He stopped, eased off his pack and the tenderfoot's and set them down at the edge of the busy traffic.

"Here," he grunted, "I'm tired carrying all this stuff. You stay and keep a close eye on it, while I scout around and hunt up the claims office and see how she looks. But whatever you do don't go away, because they'll swipe our stuff the minute your back is turned—I know these boom camps. And it'd cost ten times what it's worth to replace it."

He left the little tenderfoot and started on alone.

A man, lounging against the pole of a saloon tent, suddenly snapped erect as Shad came abreast of him; at the same moment Gurney saw him and slowed, his eyes growing narrow and hard.

"Hello, Shad," the man greeted, his voice barely above a whisper. He was a gaunt, sandy-haired figure with a drooping pale mustache over a hard mouth.

Shad eyed him with no friendliness. "Dirk Pelton!" he grunted. "I knew I'd run into you here—and Lance McCabe too, I'll wager. How are you boys finding the claim jumpin' business?"

His tawny eyes flaming, Pelton surged forward. "Listen here, Gurney! You watch your talk!"

"Aw, git away!" Shad elbowed him aside, indifferently. "You two show up at every gold strike that's made, and you always give me trouble."

"Some day I'll just naturally up and kill you!" Pelton promised tightly.

Gurney spat in the mud. "You mean you may just naturally up and try! Well, that's your privilege! I'll be waitin'."

With no more waste of words he sidestepped Pelton and strode on along the street. He had never known anything but contempt for the tawnyhaired killer; but Lance McCabe, Shad's other ancient enemy, was another problem. He made the brains of that claim-jumping, backshooting combination, and he had a ruthless cunning that Shad was forced to respect.

A big crowd hung around the recorder's tent. Shad nosed about, asking questions. As he feared, all the claims for a long way above and below Discovery had already been staked and so had nearly every other likely looking spot along the course of the Creek valley. "How does it look?" he asked one oldtimer.

"Not good, not bad," said the other. "There's color here, all right; but so far only Discovery and one or two other claims

are paying off much. Nobody, yet, has found the kind of mineral that we figure just has to be there. It's anybody's guess."

Shad considered. "Well, I reckon I'll take me a look around, now I'm here. . . ."

Heading back to the place where he had left his packs, and the tenderfoot, he was suddenly startled to see the latter hurrying toward him through the crowd. "What's up?" he demanded.

The little man was scared. "I saw you arguing with that man back there by the saloon. After you left he got hold of another and I think they're laying for you down the street. I think they mean trouble!"

"Oh, they do!" Shad's eye went mean as he hitched up his trousers, settled the six-gun in its belt. "Just show me!"

The tenderfoot did. Dirk Pelton was out of sight around the corner of a tent, but Shad could make out the shadow of him against the canvas. The second man was a dozen feet farther on—not Lance McCabe, as Shad had expected, but a tough gunnie named Legg that sometimes worked for him. Legg was watching Shad Gurney, narrowly.

"Keep back," Shad warned his companion. Then he was striding deliberately down on that bushwhack setup.

He did not draw his gun—not until he was almost even with the tent corner where Pelton waited. But then suddenly the weapon was in his hand and he fired right through the canvas, and heard Dirk's scream mingle with the shot.

As the echoes bounced along the narrow street he whirled, ducking into the entrance of the tent. Somebody running out of it jostled him and he lost balance; caught it again and turned to fling a bullet at Legg. The latter fired at the same moment, the slug streaking at the sky. Shad's bullet had missed, but the suddenness of his attack had taken the fight out of Legg. As Gurney lined up for another shot he saw the man turn and melt hastily into the crowd.

Excitement boiled around the scene of the shooting. Shad came out of the tent, looking for Pelton. Dirk was down, rolling from side to side, screaming with pain. A quick glance showed Gurney that he had given the man a slight bullet burn along one arm, but apparently Dirk thought he was done for.

"Yellow-bellied hound!" Shad muttered scornfully; but Pelton had his eyes screwed tight shut and paid no attention to anything but his own agony. Shad turned on his heel, walked away from the curious throng that was gathering around Pelton. He caught Homer Cross's eye, beckoned to him.

"Thanks, Homer," he said, as he punched out the empties and reloaded his gun. "You probably saved my life that trip. I reckon we're even now."

The tenderfoot smiled. He was still pale from his scare, and peaked from his own near escape from pneumonia. He didn't say anything.

A moment later, Shad hauled up with a curse, staring at the spot where they had left their packs. The smaller man followed his glance.

"They're—gone!" he stammered.

"Yeah!" Big Shad's face had turned suddenly red, and a vein began to throb under the thick yellow hair at his temple. Fists tightening, he waited until he had a good hold on his temper before he spoke again.

"I told you some sluice-robbin' skunk would grab our stuff if you didn't keep an eye on it! Now wait, Homer," he added, quickly. "Understand, I ain't blamin' you—you done the best you knew, trying to keep me from walking into a gun trap. But—I can see right now you're nothing but a plumb poison jinx. I don't want you hangin' around me any longer! I don't want to even see you!"

Homer Cross tried to say something, his pale lips trembling. Shad's temper left him then and he shouted: "You heard me! Beat it!" He gave the other a shove, that almost knocked him sprawling. Homer Cross caught himself, and then Shad saw the hurt pride in his pinched and ageing features.

"Of course, Mr. Gurney." He hesitated. His voice sounded unsteady. "And—thanks for all you've done."

With that he turned and Shad scowled, watching the slight shape disappear into the crowd and somehow feeling ashamed of himself. But then he shrugged that away. The little fellow was a jinx—a Jonah. And Shad Gurney's luck never amounted to much as it was, without taking on this extra burden.

In five minutes he had forgotten all about the little tenderfoot.

RIGHT now, having lost his pack, he was going to have to do the thing he had dreaded and buy all new equipment. At boom camp prices, that could easily clean out what was left of his grubstake. . . . But when he went out to find a merchant's tent and make his purchases, he found the situation was going to be tougher than he anticipated.

In a camp this size there should have been a half dozen supply tents set up along the muddy, twisted street, with competition serving to keep prices at least within reason. Tramping through the heavy gumbo, however, scanning the crude signboards as he shouldered the busy traffic, Shad Gurney quickly saw that Crow Creek had but one store—a big, busy tent with wooden walls and flooring, long pine counters running along the sides, and a dozen clerks behind them briskly serving the constant flow of trade.

With a monopoly like this, prices soared fantastically. Shad saw a miner paying ten dollars for an Ames Brothers shovel, watched five dollars in dust weighed out for a cheap metal pan, to be used in placer work. He scowled, shook his head. Why did they stand for such a setup?

Then he caught sight of the man who leaned shoulders against one of the central tent supports, a cigar in his thin-lipped mouth, a look about him as though he owned the place; and at once Shad Gurney understood.

This man was listening while the gunslick, Legg, poured out a hasty torrent of angry words. He didn't seem too pleased himself; his small black eyes had an ugly squint to them, his mustached lip curled downward at what he heard. Then his glance lit on Shad Gurney and it kindled sharply, the man straightening a little in his black alpaca coat, that looked slightly out place among all those homespuns and butternut jeans and muddy boots.

Shad Gurney walked straight toward this man, and saw Legg's startled fear as he too sighted the newcomer. Shad said, loudly: "Hello, Lance McCabe! Just getting the report on how your gunwolves missed their chance at me?"

Hatred flickered behind the other's blank stare; then a veil seemed to drop across it. "You think I'd go out of my way to get rid of you, Gurney? You flatter yourself! Dirk Pelton just don't like you, is all."

"You're a liar!" Men around them were watching and listening now. A space had cleared around the three, no one wanting too close to what was developing here. Sunlight on the high canvas laid a strange half light over the scene.

Shad Gurney went on coldly: "I think you had the boys primed to stop me if I showed up at this strike. Otherwise, why should Legg come hightailing to you five minutes after the shooting?"

McCabe wouldn't rile. He shrugged, took the cigar out of his mouth, studied the glowing end of it as a half-smile twisted his hard lips. "Have it any way you like, then. You're a nuisance, Gurney. I think sometimes you must follow me from camp to camp, just trying to make trouble for me. Things are going very nicely here, without you sticking your beak in."

"Yeah," the yellowhaired man agreed. "Going real nice. I see you've got rid of all your competition," he added, indicating the big tent, the stacks of merchandise behind the counters. "Did you just scare them out? Or did you have to kill a few first?"

McCabe rammed the cigar back between his lips. Muscles along his darkbearded jaw bunched. "I don't like your talk, Gurney!" he muttered crisply.

"That's part of my great nuisance value," Shad agreed, a wicked smile lighting his blue eyes. The smile died at McCabe's next comment—a few, brief and expressive words. Without warning Shad's big fist arced forward.

It smashed the cigar against the other's face, and the whole tent seemed to give a lurch as McCabe slammed against the post behind him, went down heavily. He gave a bellow, rolled to his knees and was pawing at the shred tobacco and the hot ashes when Legg, snapping out of his lethargy, began a hasty motion for one of his two, lowhung holsters.

The gunman didn't finish the move. Shad Gurney had one big hand on the butt of his own weapon, and without doing anything more he scared Legg out of the uncompleted draw.

"Go ahead!" Shad taunted him, in the tense silence that had fallen over the stuffy air of the tent. "Try something—drag that iron out, or call me a name."

Legg shook his head a little, eyes bugged with fear, both hands well above his twin holsters and out of danger. Shad Gurney gave a shrug.

"Aw, hell!" he grunted. "What fun is there, gettin' mad with a polecat like you? You won't fight back!"

With that he deliberately turned his back on Legg, and on McCabe who was just getting to his feet, face livid with anger, and still spitting tobacco. Shad Gurney elbowed his way into the line at one of the long counters, seemingly oblivious to all the eyes that were staring at his heavy-knit frame.

To the scared clerk who hurried to wait on him he said: "I know I'm gettin' robbed, but just the same there's stuff I want to buy. First of all, trot out one of those Ames Brothers shovels. Then, I reckon I'll take. . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

The Devil Rules the Roost

IT FINISHED his roll, but Shad Gurney gritted his teeth and paid the exorbitant charges without protest. On the whole he was feeling pretty good now. He had let off steam, with that solid punch that ruined Lance McCabe's cigar. Now his main desire was to get out there on the Creek and find himself a claim that wasn't already taken.

He wrapped the stuff into a sleazy blanket the clerk sold him, lashed his shovel to the roll and hoisted it onto broad shoulders. McCabe and his gunman had disappeared. Men made way with respectful glances as Gurney clomped out of the tent, hobnailed boots chewing up the wooden flooring.

In the bleak sunlight outside a gaunt, stoopshouldered ancient blocked his path, bony hand outthrust. "I saw what you did to Lance McCabe. That devil has ruled the roost here in Crow Creek long enough. I'd like to shake your hand, mister."

Shad frowned at the hand, uncertainly, seeing that it was smeared with something thick and black that he thought perhaps was printer's ink. As he took the oldster's palm, gingerly, the latter went on: "Vic Thomas is my name—my place is just a little up the street here. Like to interview you, if you can spare a little time."

"Do what to me?" Shad Gurney echoed. But as he was going that way anyhow he let the old man fall in beside him, having trouble pacing Shad's longlegged stride.

Presently they came to a small frame building, where the rhythmic sound of a handpress floated through the open door. "Won't you step in a minute?" old Vic Thomas begged. "I want to show you my layout."

Shad made a gesture of indifference and followed him across the threshold, out of the noisy street and into the office of the Crow Creek *Courier*.

The room was a litter of crumpled papers. The tiny handpress sat on a packing case, and a girl was operating it, feeding in one by one sheets of newsprint that were hardly more than pamphlet size. She stopped work as they entered, and the old man was saying: "This is my daughter, Sue." He told the girl: "Sue, I want you to meet a young man who just smeared one of Lance McCabe's cigars all over the skunk's face. and scared one of McCabe's gunslingers out of doing anything about it! What's the name again, young man? Gurney?"

Shad hardly heard him. He was too busy looking at Sue Thomas. She was dressed miner-style, in a plaid shirt and California jeans shoved into boot tops; but even the rough clothes, and the smear of ink across one cheek, couldn't disguise the fact that here was as pretty a blackhaired, blue-eyed young lady as Shad Gurney had ever sighted.

Right now she was staring at Shad, in awed interest. Grinning, she swiped a small hand across the seat of her jeans and thrust it at him, boy-fashion. "I'd like to shake the hand that shook Lance McCabe!" she exclaimed. "If you don't mind the ink—"

Awkwardly, he folded his big paw over her slender fingers. Vic Thomas took up again.

"The *Courier* is the only newssheet in camp," he said, proudly. "Comes out twice a week. The stage usually fetches us in a regular paper from outside and we boil down the news and run it off, along with any local happenings worth writing up. Usually of course the stuff is two-three months old, but the boys seem glad enough to get it. They pay us a dollar a copy."

Shad Gurney whistled. "That's good money!"

"You bet it is! Here!" Thomas thumbed one of the freshly printed papers off the pile, handed it to him. "Take a look."

The ink was a little smeared, the handset type crudely set up. But, along with brief summaries of events in the East and in Europe, there was one local item that made Shad Gurney's eyes pop as he read it.

It was a report of robberies in the camp, during the past three weeks. A half dozen miners, it said, had been slugged and cleaned of their pokes in that period of time —always, within a half hour of checking their gold out of the big safe at McCabe's store, where it had been kept for them. Without doing it in so many words, the brief paragraph managed to draw attention to that coincidence.

Shad lifted his yellow head, stared at old Thomas. "Did I read this wrong?" he grunted. "Or are you just asking for trouble from McCabe?"

The old man shrugged. "I print the facts," he said airily. "If anybody wants to read between the lines, and figure out that McCabe must have sent out one of his gunmen to bring that gold back to him—can I help it?"

"But you're taking a risk, and you know it! What about your daughter, man?"

"Oh, no need to worry about me!" the girl answered, archly.

FROM the door a voice said: "That's right, Sue." A man came into the room, a slim, good-looking young chap with a shade of red in his curly hair, who must have been standing there and hearing all that was being said. He had a miner's brawny shoulders, and he wore a pouched sixgun. He came directly to the girl and put one arm possessively around her waist.

"Ain't nothin' gonna hurt this girl!" he declared, smiling down at her. "And one of these days I'll have my stake and then she'll be mine to take care of for life!"

She blushed a little and gave him a playful shove. "Why, Ed Storm!" she exclaimed, giggling. But she didn't try to escape his encircling arm.

Something settled inside of Shad Gurney. It felt like jealousy. He looked away from the man and the girl, quickly, half thinking Ed Storm was going to kiss Sue right there and not wanting to watch it happen at all.

But why should he be jealous? he wondered, suddenly angry with himself. Of a pretty girl he'd only seen for about ten minutes altogether? Maybe, seeing Ed Storm with his arm so confidently around her just served to remind Shad of the wasted years he had spent, following the gold gleam that never came to anything. Here he was, past thirty, no closer than ever to his goal. And here was this soft young creature, as cute as a kitten's ear—

"I don't fear printing the truth!" old Vic Thomas was saying stoutly. "And I'd like to tell the facts about your run-in with McCabe just now. Is it so that he tried to have you murdered? I think my readers ought to be allowed to—"

Irritation shot through Shad Gurney. "Just a minute!" he said roughly, tossing the inksmeared sheet he was holding onto the box with the others. "I don't want you puttin' me in your paper, understand? Just forget the whole business. And if you take my advice you'll find something else to do instead of needle Lance McCabe. You're talkin' yourself straight into a bushwhack bullet!"

Stooping, he got the bedroll he had deposited on the floor and headed for the door with it, wanting to be away from there. He left them staring—the girl, and the father, and the young redhead with his arm still around Sue's waist. It was Sue that called after Shad Gurney, her voice a bit sharp with scorn:

"I thought you weren't afraid of McCabe!"

"I ain't!" he retorted, stung into whirling at the door. "But that shooting today was personal, and the sock I handed him settled it. . . . And—oh, hell, what's the difference!"

He whipped out of the doorway and shouldered on along the jammed thoroughfare. He wished he'd never run across those people; somehow they'd prodded him wrong, so that even the pleasure of smearing McCabe's cigar all over his face had lost its savor. But damned if he would waste any time worrying about pigheaded old Vic Thomas. Or about his daughter either; she had a man to look after her, didn't she?

Somehow that reminded him of Homer Cross, and the widow in Indiana with the

three kids. Shad wondered how the little fellow was doing, right now. Then he grimaced.

Why should Homer—or anybody else—want to load themselves down with a woman? Men just naturally didn't know when they were well off. Shad muttered: "I'm purely glad I never had time for none of 'em." He tried to kid himself that he meant it.

He put the tawdry camp of tents and tin roofed shanties behind him and pushed on up the gulch, belatedly getting under way in his own search for wealth. He was indeed a late comer, which irked him when he realized, that but for the tenderfoot, he might have reached here before the heaviest rush struck the place.

The muddy banks of Crow Creek were aswarm with me. Men digging, men squatting with pans full of water and gravel rotating in their hands. Hammers rang as roughly dressed, bearded miners knocked together sluice boxes and rockers. Behind the creek bottom, the gulch steepened sharply to a bleak, rocky rim. Almost all of this land was taken by eager searchers for gold.

Shad Gurney began to think all the claims were gone, but at one point along the muddy, roiled stream he ran across a man in the act of rolling up his pack. "I'm quittin'," this man told him, moodily. "I've wasted enough time."

"Ain't been takin' out anything?" Shad asked him, looking around at the dirt the man had turned, and the makeshift rocker.

The other shrugged. "Oh, sure—about ten cents a day. Looks like if you ain't right on top of Discovery, you don't get enough color to make it worth fooling with."

Shad Gurney was puzzled. "That don't sound reasonable."

"Well, reasonable or not I'm quittin'. You're welcome to take over here if you want to."

"Thanks. Maybe I will."

When the man was gone, Shad lost no time throwing his pack and breaking out his equipment. The first experimental shovelful he panned showed color, all right—the merest trace. Shad Gurney fired up his pipe and hunkered there on the bank awhile, considering.

From all he had heard, there had to be gold here somewhere, in good quantities. Real dust was being scraped out of the sluice box riffles at Discovery, and just below; but nothing like the kind of mineral that everyone expected. And, strangely enough, the color seemed to peter out to nothing, going upcreek from Discovery claim. . . .

He shook his head, tamped out the pipe and went to work.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hot Lead—Raw Gold!

A WEEK passed. Seven sweaty, toiling, discouraging days, with big Shad Gurney constantly at his labor and falling deeper into moody bitterness. He was taking a little gold out of this stream bed gravel, but not very much; his claim was too far downstream from Discovery. Nights he slept beside his rocker and shovel, wrapped in his blanket against the increasing chill of Fall, worn out with dark-to-dark industry. He would lie there propped against a boulder, pipe glowing redly at the high stars, and try to figure this out. And daily his temper grew shorter.

One day toward the end of that first, heartbreaking week, Shad was hard at work when Ed Storm, the redhead, came and squatted on his ankles nearby. Shad gave him hardly a look. Storm said, in a queer voice: "You heard the news?"

"You mean, Hayes was elected?" Shad Gurney's boot drove the shovelbit deep into loose rubble. "I knew that last November."

"This ain't no time for jokes, mister! Vic Thomas has been shot. . . ."

Shad left his shovel in the ground, hauled himself up out of the hole. Seated on the edge of it, he looked across at the younger man, a heavy scowl on his face. "Dead?"

Storm shook his head. Gurney saw now that the man was badly rattled. Sweat stood on his forehead, though the day was not warm. He tried to toss a handful of gravel from one palm to the other, and spilled most of it.

"Vic printed some stuff in the paper this morning that McCabe didn't like. A couple of McCabe's bullies come around to the shop and smashed the press, strewed the type into the mud of the street like it was

grass seed. When Thomas tried to stop them Dirk Pelton put a bullet through his chest. Sue's with him now, at the doctor's."

Instinctively, Shad reached for his smokeblackened old pipe. "Haven't got a copy of that paper, have you?"

Ed Storm fished it from his pocket, passed it over. Vic Thomas had pulled no punches, had left no names uncalled. Shad Gurney shook his head, threw the ink-smeared sheet into the hole. "Damned idiot!" he grunted. "What'd he expect, printing such stuff?"

"But it's the truth!" the redhead objected. "Every word of it! Somebody's got to show Lance McCabe he can't get away with a thing like this. That—that's why I came to you," he blurted.

"I see." Shad Gurney stuffed the pipe back into hip pocket without smoking it. He said coldly: "You want me to help you make a grandstand play to impress the girl, it that it? No thanks, Storm! This thing was bound to happen to old man Thomas and I figure he was lucky to come out alive. He's made enough from that two-bit newspaper. Soon as he can travel, let him take his gold and his daughter and get out of this hell-hole gold camp. They'd both be better off."

The redhead's face went angry. "Have you no respect for seeing justice done?"

"Nope—only when I'm riled. And I'm too busy to be bothered now." He looked at Storm's filled gunpouch. "What exactly is holding you, if you're so hell bent for justice?"

Ed Storm touched the tip of his tongue to dry lips. "I'm not a gunman," he protested.

"Well, neither am I." Face wooden, Shad Gurney jumped down into the hole again, reaching for shovel handle. "I'm just a sucker trying to pan fifty cents to the ton out of this Godforsaken creek. . . . Now go away and lemme work. I'm in a bad mood. And my advice to the Thomas's stands: Tell them to get out of Crow Creek and count themselves lucky they can do it!"

The redhead still wanted to argue, but Shad bent to his task and ignored him, throwing out huge shovelfuls of dirt that threatened to engulf the other man. The third one came too close. Ed Storm leaped up, cussing a little and dusting the gravel off his clothes, and then abruptly he turned on one heel and went away. Shad saw him hesitate once, half turn to come back; but then the slim young man went on and he had a beaten, unhappy look about him—a look oddly at variance with the smirk of confidence he'd worn, that day in the *Courier* office.

After he was gone, Shad stopped his furious industry and leaned on the shovel a minute, looking out at the swirling, mud-died waters of the creek.

Shad Gurney wasn't exactly proud of himself. He knew why he'd turned Ed Storm down: Jealousy, again! If Sue Thomas had come herself and asked for help, he likely would have thrown away his shovel and gone larruping into camp with his gun blazing, straight against McCabe's whole gang of trigger artists.

Which would, of course, have been plain silly!

He shook his head. It was a good thing the girl hadn't been along to talk him into that. Any time Lance McCabe crossed his path Gurney could hold his own against the crooked snake; but damned if he was going to be the catspaw to get himself killed hauling other people's chestnuts out of the blazes. Especially when they had brought the trouble on themselves for lack of common horse sense!

He had troubles enough of his own, he thought, looking glumly at the muddy mess about him, and the tiny poke with barely ten dollars' worth of gold dust in the bottom of it—the fruits of a week of steady toil!

An hour or so later, while he was monkeying with a broken timber of the rocker, he sighted a lone figure plodding up the trail toward camp. The slight, bowed frame looked familiar, but it took him a minute to recognize it. Then Shad Gurney was calling out: "Hi, there! Homer!" and the other stopped, turned to see who was calling his name.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Gurney!" He came over toward Shad, who found himself suddenly glad to see the little man again. Homer Cross had been having a rough time, it appeared. His face was blistered and sunburned; his clothing muddy, and shapeless with constant wear. The hand he extended to shake with Gurney had new-healed sores on it, where blisters had formed and broken.

"What do you know?" asked Shad.

The little man shook his graying head, moodily. "I'm going home. You were right, Mr. Gurney—I was a fool to leave Indiana."

"Tough!" Shad looked at the little fellow's soiled clothing. "What you been doing—working a claim?" And at the other's unexpected nod: "Find anything?"

A twisted smile of self mockery hardened the pinched lips. "Yes—some beautiful specimens of iron pyrites. Fool's gold, I understand they call it. I'm going to take them home and set them on the mantel, as a warning in case I ever get any more wild notions about looking for my fortune."

From a bulging pocket he brought a fragment of rock, with gold-colored threads shot through it. He tossed it over. "I certainly thought it was real enough, first time I chipped it loose. That's a tenderfoot for you!"

Shad turned the rock over and over. "Who told you about it being pyrites?"

"Why, that Mr. McCabe. He looks like a gentleman, and I thought he could let me know whether it was worth while having the rock assayed . . ." Something in the big man's look made him falter. "What's wrong, Mr. Gurney?"

Shad's face was hard, his eyes lit with anger and a rising excitement. He could hardly speak for the flutter of his breathing. "Show—" He had to swallow, try again. "Show me where you found this stuff, Homer. Friend McCabe was lyin'!"

UP HERE, under the granite rim, a strong wind blew hard against them and the muddy course of Crow Creek flowed in its trough below. Homer Cross, infected by Gurney's own excitement, panted as they toiled up the steep slope: "Every claim near the creek was taken. This was the nearest I could get. I had a pick and I scraped around with it. I didn't know what I was doing—"

Scars of unweathered rock indicated where he had worked. More of the bright yellow showed in it. "Somebody else must have been here," the tenderfoot cried, "I didn't do this . . ."

"Damned right!" Shad Gurney bit out. "McCabe didn't forget to ask where you located this stuff, did he? No, I bet not! And as soon as you were gone he beat it

NOW a DYNAMIC HEAVY DUTY INDUSTRIAL WELDER ONLY $28.50 COMPLETE

IDEAL FOR AUTO, FARM AND HOME APPLIANCE REPAIRS

WORKS on Iron, Steel, and other metals . . . does work you'd expect from a larger, costlier machine; portable, easily carried; operates from any properly wired 110 VOLT LINE, has 8 metallic and carbon arc welding heat stages. Also available for 220 Volt operation at slight additional cost. EASY to OPERATE—if inexperienced you can learn to do high grade welding by following the simplified welding and operating instructions furnished—comes complete ready to operate with helmet, rods, cable, instructions, etc. SAVE TIME & MONEY—Do your own welding—just a few repair jobs will pay for this portable, industrial transformer type machine. A PRACTICAL and PROFITABLE MACHINE TOOL FOR ANY WORKSHOP. Make money doing repair work for others. Write today for full particulars and 10-day FREE Trial Offer.

DYNAMIC WELDER CO. 13 E. 23rd St.— NR Chicago 16, Illinois

LAW . . .

STUDY AT HOME Legally trained men win higher positions and bigger success in business and public life. Greater opportunities now than ever before. More Ability: More Prestige: More Money We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL.B. We furnish all text material, including 14-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 48-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send NOW. G. I. APPROVED.
LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY, 417 South Dearborn Street
A Correspondence Institution, Dept. 9334-L, Chicago 5, Ill.

LOCKSMITHING and Key Making! Complete Up-to-date COURSE . . . How to pick locks, decode, make master-keys, repair, install, service, etc. 53 easy illustrated SELF-INSTRUCTION LESSONS for every handy man, home-owner, carpenter, mechanic, etc. Satisfaction guaranteed. Send for Success-catalog FREE.
NELSON CO., 1130 S. Wabash, Dept. 1-OS, Chicago 5

COMPLETE HOME WORKSHOP

ONLY $34.95

5 TOOLS IN ONE!

Here is power tool pleasure and profit in a ruggedly built, HEAVY steel unit—the Emrick Universal Woodworker. Handles big work. Drill press pulls ½" drill in steel. Saw takes 6" to 8" blade. Lathe 10" swing, 30" centers, spindle dia. ¾". Takes all standard accessories. Sander 8" dia. Emery wheel 5". Bronze bearings, replaceable throughout. Price does not include motor and saw blade. Order today.

10 DAY TRIAL

SAW LATHE DRILL PRESS SANDER GRINDER

1710 CLINTON STREET
EMRICK, Inc. KALAMAZOO 24, MICH.
☐ Ship on 10 Days Trial. I am enclosing $17.50, balance C.O.D. ☐ Send free literature.
Name_____
Address_____ City_____

Now CHEAP OIL BURNER
FOR HEATING AND COOKING STOVES-FURNACES
HEAT YOUR HOME, COOK YOUR MEALS
WITH CHEAP FURNACE OIL
NO MORE SHOVELING COAL OR ASHES. Sensational Fueliser Starter Vaporizing System turns Cheap No. 1 Furnace Oil, also Range, Heater, Tractor Distillate, Kerosene and like oils into oil heat—one of the quickest, hottest fires known. LIFETIME GUARANTEE. $1.00 Bonus Offer for Testing. We will let you try it in your own stove or furnace for one month. Get yours for introducing. Big profits QUICK. Be first. Send in your name today for details and cash in on the tremendous demand for this Amazing Invention.
NORTHWEST MFG. CO 604-L Mitchell, S. Dak

INVENTORS

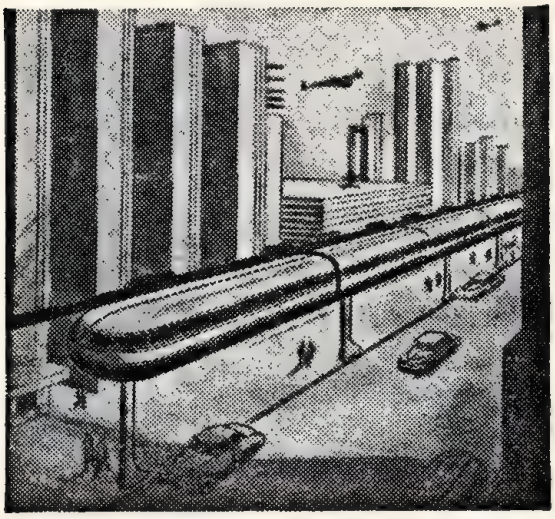
Patent laws encourage the development of inventions. Write for further particulars as to patent protection and procedure and "Invention Record" form at once. No obligation.
McMORROW, BERMAN & DAVIDSON
Registered Patent Attorneys
180-B Victor Building, Washington 1, D. C.

STAMMER?

GET THIS FREE BOOK!

This new 128-page book, "Stammering, Its Cause and Correction," describes the Bogue Unit Method for scientific correction of stammering and stuttering—successful for 46 years.
Benj. N. Bogue, Dept. 2994, Circle Tower, Indianapolis 4, Ind.

STRATOLINERS ON STILTS



COMMUTER COMFORT at three hundred miles an hour in sound-proof projectiles of suspended steel—this is not a Futurama pipe-dream but the pledge of P. S. Combs, top-ranking consultant engineer, whose unique monorail system is claiming the attention of harassed transportation officials in urban centers throughout the United States. In an era of four-mile-an-hour surface traffic, the man who planned and supervised Chicago's sixty-million-dollar water system has come up with a practical solution to America's greatest transportation problem. Don't miss *Combs' Monorail* in the September issue of *Railroad Magazine*. Twenty-five cents at your newsstand, or send $2.50 for a year's subscription to—

RAILROAD MAGAZINE

205 E. 42nd St., New York City 17

up here himself and did some nosing around. Look!"

He pointed at a little pyramid of stones, the top one weighting down a piece of paper. "He's got his monuments set up, and right now he's likely hightailing for the recorder's office. You know what you done, Homer? You just naturally blundered onto the mother lode!"

The tenderfoot's eyes started as though they would pop from his head. He tried to say something, his jaw wobbling. Shad Gurney put a hand on his shoulder, turned him so he could see the creek below.

"You'll notice, we're directly above Discovery, here. This rim is so rotten with ore that some of it weathered off and spring freshets carried it down and dumped it into the stream. You can see where the water has flowed. That explains why nothing was ever found upstream."

Only one thing made sense to Homer Cross. "You mean I've struck it rich?" he blurted. "You're—you're sure?"

A little bitterly, Shad Gurney answered: "I haven't spent a lifetime hunting for gold myself, without knowing what it looked like!" And then his face went bleak. "There's still that skunk, McCabe! We got to try and beat him to the recorder's tent!"

. . . He didn't stop to think that this was just what he had sworn he would never do—pull another man's chestnuts out of the fire. Anyway, there was a difference. Old Vic Thomas had brought trouble on himself. Little Homer Cross was the victim of unscrupulous trickery and sudenly it didn't matter to Shad that this fight was not his own.

There seemed small hope, though, of beating Lance McCabe. Shad took the muddy trail at a steady jog that soon lost the little tenderfoot somewhere behind him. He didn't wait. He was panting himself when he hit the edge of camp; and then, knowing he probably faced a fight, he stopped longe enough to get his wind before he went striding alone the twisted street to the claims office.

Four or five booted miners were queued up at the recorders' counter. The second one was Dirk Pelton. Shad Gurney understood, then, that McCabe was playing safe by letting his gunman do the actual recording of the stolen claim; and the time Mc-

Cabe had lost in finding Pelton and explaining the setup to him was what had played into Shad Gurney's hands.

The man in front of Dirk finished his business and stepped away from the counter. Pelton was just opening his mouth when Shad Gurney ducked under the flap of the tent canvas.

"Shut it, Dirk!" Shad ordered in a voice like a whiplash. "Shut it or I'll close your dirty mouth permanent, with a .45 slug!"

Dirk Pelton tried to back away, tried to bat aside the hand that gripped him. Shad twisted harder, and his other fist exploded against the man's nose, flattening it. Blood spurted. Dirk Pelton screamed. Shad hit him again and let him drop to the ground like a half filled sack.

"Mr. Gurney! *Look out!*"

The cry brought him around swiftly. Homer Cross, panting from his hard run, had caught up with him and was hanging onto one of the tent poles at the entrance, gesticulating wildly. Past him, Shad Gurney saw the lean, cadaverous shape of Lance McCabe, with the gunman, Legg, siding him.

"Out of the way, partner!" Shad cried, waving Homer Cross aside as his own right hand dug for leather. The little tenderfoot, petrified with horror, didn't move. Jaw set hard, Shad Gurney had to aim past him. He hit trigger, his bullet taking Legg in the chest and knocking him backward, lifeless, into the mud.

Shad Gurney ran forward then, out of the shadow of the tent, moving fast to put Homer Cross out of the line of fire. He ran head-on into Lance McCabe's bullet.

It pounded into him; he stumbled, went

SHUR-LITE DISC FLINT
THE PLASTIC DISC
IN THE HANDY DISC PAC
BUY 'EM BY THE DISC
WHOLESALERS SOLICITED
BRYN MAWR SMOKERS NOVELTY CO.
63 E. Adams St., Chicago 3

ACCOUNTANT
BECOME AN EXPERT
Executive Accountants and C. P. A.'s earn $2,000 to $10,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. We train you thoroly at home in spare time for C. P. A. examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C. P. A.'s. Placement counsel and help. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays." G. I. APPROVED.
LASALLE Extension University, 417 So. Dearborn St.
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 1334-H, Chicago 5, Ill.

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home
MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 50—Many Swedish Massage graduates make $50, $75 or even more per week. Larger full time income from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. You can win independence and prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma. Anatomy Charts and 32-page Illustrated Book FREE — NOW! The College of Swedish Massage Dept. 795-L, 100 E. Ohio St., Chicago 11

ELECTRIC LIGHT JAZZ BOW TIE!
ONLY $1.95 POSTPAID
Astonish, amaze your friends. Be the life of the party. Have lots of fun. Easily put on. Flashes on and off by simply pressing the magic button hidden in your pocket. Complete with attractive bow tie, cord, two bulbs and battery. Mail your order today.
BERNARD FINE CO.
501 Sixth Ave., Dept. PB, New York 11, N.Y.

Government Jobs!
Start $1,756 to $3,021 year
MEN — WOMEN. Thousands of positions open. Prepare NOW for next Examinations. Write immediately for free 32-page book, with list of positions and particulars telling how to prepare. Veterans get preference.
FRANKLIN INSTITUTE
Dept. L89, Rochester 4, N. Y.

Now She Shops "Cash and Carry"
Without Painful Backache

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

BIGGER PAY THRU SPARE TIME TRAINING

A better job—more money can be yours if you are ready. Prepare now in spare time and reap the rewards of early success. Free 48-page books tell how. Check the book in the business field you like—write your name and address on margin of this ad and mail. Do it now. *G. I. APPROVED

*☐Higher Accountancy *☐Business Management
*☐Traffic Management ☐Salesmanship
*☐Law—Degree of LL.B. *☐Expert Bookkeeping
*☐Commercial Law *☐C. P. A. Coaching
☐Stenotypy (Machine Shorthand)

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
A Correspondence Institution
417 So. Dearborn St. Dept. 9334-R Chicago 5, Ill.

GENUINE
PRE-WAR MADE U. S. A.
BINOCULARS
$2.48
Plus Gov. Excise Tax
Value over $2.98

Heavy duty 30 mm Light in Weight beauties made with all the features of the most expensive types. Brings all distant objects close to you with surprising clarity. Many valuable uses. Neckstrap with each pair. Send money order, check or cash. C. O. D. — Postpaid. You'll be satisfied or money refunded. Write Van Keen Opticals, 603 Pennsylvania Ave., Brooklyn 7, N. Y., Dept. B-1

MECHANICS • HOME STUDY

Step up your own skill with facts & figures of your trade. Audels Mechanics Guides contain Practical Inside Trade Information in handy form. Fully illustrated. Easy to Understand. Highly Endorsed. Check book you want for 7 days' Free Examination. Send no Money. Nothing to pay postman. ☐Carpentry $6 • ☐Auto $4 • ☐ Oil Burners $1 ☐Sheet Metal $1 • ☐Welding $1 • ☐Refrigeration $4 ☐Plumbing $6 • ☐Masonry $6 • ☐Painting $2 • ☐Radio $4 ☐Electricity $4 • ☐Mathematics $2 • ☐Steam Engineers $4 ☐Machinist $4 • ☐Blueprint $2 • ☐Diesel $2 • ☐Drawing $2. If satisfied you pay only $1 a month until price is paid.
AUDEL, Publishers, 49 W. 23 St., New York 10, N. Y.

High School Course at Home
Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work — prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.
American School, Dept. H648, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

Free Book
MOUNT BIRDS, ANIMALS, FISH

MAIL Postal Today

You FREE. Explains Taxidermy. Tells how to learn at home by mail to mount birds, animals, heads . . . to TAN skins and furs. Great for MEN and BOYS. Fun! Also earn money in spare time. WRITE TODAY — NOW — for free book containing 100 game pictures. State AGE.
N.W. School of Taxidermy, Dept. 3366, Omaha, Neb.

INVENTORS

Learn how to protect your invention. Secure "Patent Guide" together with "Record of Invention" form—without obligation.
CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON
Registered Patent Attorneys
726-G District National Bldg. Washington 5, D. C.

LAW

STUDY AT HOME FOR PERSONAL SUCCESS and LARGER EARNINGS, 38 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payments. Send for FREE BOOK—"Law and Executive Guidance"—NOW!
AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 81-B, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

Train Your Own HORSES!

Colts - Stock Horses - Circus Horses
Gait Show Horses - Write for FREE BOOK
ANIMAL LOVERS' ASSOCIATION
Box G-111, Tarzana, Calif.

to one knee, and the old hat fell from his yellow head. A hand against the ground to steady him, he forced his head up. Bleak fall sunlight stabbed his unshaded eyes, and fiery pain was in him. But he rested his gunwrist on the bent knee, and fired instinctively at the black outline that was all he could see of Lance McCabe.

HE WAS lying on a cot in the doctor's tent, stiff and sore and reeking with antiseptic; but that bullet in his side wasn't going to do more than lay up for a week or so. Of more concern to Shad Gurney just then was the question that he put to little Homer Cross, anxiously: "Did you get your claim recorded all right?"

The little man bobbed his head, pinched face still white and scared. "Yes, I did. In both our names. The claim is as much yours as mine," he insisted over Shad's quick protest. "If it weren't for you I wouldn't have it—why, except for you I'd be dead now, out there on the trail to Crow Creek! And, anyway—I don't know the first darn thing about developing a gold mine. . . ."

"All right, Homer," said Shad then, and he grinned. "We'll handle it share and share alike—there's more'n enough mineral up there to fix us both for life."

In the cot next to Shad Gurney, old Vic Thomas lay heavily bandaged, his sharp eyes smiling. Sue was beside him, and now she came hesitantly toward Shad Gurney. "Listen, Mr. Gurney," she began.

She stopped, a queer look passing over her pretty face. "Did—did Ed Storm talk to you?"

Sue shook her head. "I guess what Ed didn't tell you," she said, in a dead sort of voice, "was that McCabe ordered him out of camp this morning—knowing Ed had been pretty thick with me and Dad. He—left, an hour later!"

"Why, the yellow livered—" Shad broke off, reading the pain in Sue's pretty eyes. She must have thought a lot of Ed Storm, he guessed with quick sympathy.

At the look she gave him Shad Gurney's old confidence began suddenly to rise again. With the redhead out of the picture, and half interest in a gold mine in his poke, no reason he couldn't just stake his own claim on this cute little lady.

THE END

Mason's New ZIPPER Shoe

Skyrockets your SALES and PROFITS!

Customers everywhere eager to buy these unique "Zip-On . . . Zip-Off" shoes RIGHT NOW!
Top quality glove-soft leather . . . Mason craftsmanship . . . astonishing Zipper shoes lead record-breaking Mason line of over 200 superb styles of dress, work, sport shoes for men and women, with Leather Jackets, Raincoats, and other fast-selling items. A line that maintains Mason's 44-year reputation for LEADERSHIP.

POWERFUL NATIONAL ADVERTISING

Powerful National Advertising in SATURDAY EVENING POST, ESQUIRE, AMERICAN LEGION . . . scores of other powerful National Magazines . . paves the way for you.

SALES POTENTIAL TRIPLED

Cash in NOW. Help the people in your territory get highest quality, most comfortable exclusive Feature footwear they can ever buy for the money. Give them exclusive Personal Fitting Service and help yourself to a sweet, steady, ever-growing income!

GET SAMPLE OUTFIT *FREE!*

Sell the great Mason ZIPPER Shoe and hundreds of other newest styles and models! Get Big FREE Sample Outfit! Be first in your territory!

ZIPS ON
ZIPS OFF

SELL MASON'S GENUINE RUBBER RAINCOATS

Sells fast. Big profits for you! Guaranteed waterproof in heaviest rainstorms . . . thousands of customers all around you.

MASON'S LEATHER JACKETS

Keep profits rolling in with these soft, pliable, yet tough and warm, long-wearing Leather Jackets of specially dressed hides. Low Price — amazingly liberal commissions for you!

MASON'S MANY ADVANTAGES!

60,000 Pairs of Shoes!

You draw on our stock of 60,000 pairs of fine shoes in over 200 different styles plus immense daily factory-output. What a selection . . . *exact* size and width with perfect fit in the wanted style and color . . . *every* time! More shoes than your customers could find in many stores combined!

EVERY MASON SALESMAN AN EXPERT SHOE FITTER

Learn to fit every customer through Mason simple, accurate, easy-to-learn methods. Mason TRAINS YOU and makes you a Foot Expert and Certified Shoe Fitter. Mason helps you build a Big Money-Making, Permanent, Repeat Shoe Business!

MEN AND WOMEN WELCOME COMFORT OF *Air Cushioned Velvet-Eez*

Show men and women exclusive Air-Cushioned Velvet-Eez shoes that cradle foot on 10,000 tiny air bubbles! Many report they sell on six out of every ten calls!

DON'T DELAY - MAIL TODAY

CLIP and MAIL COUPON NOW!

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-747, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

RUSH me your great New Free Sample Outfit. Include your Automatic Selling Plan and send the book 5,000 Salesmen wrote for me. I want to become a Foot Expert and Certified Shoe Expert . . . and start making big money fast. Send everything FREE and Prepaid.

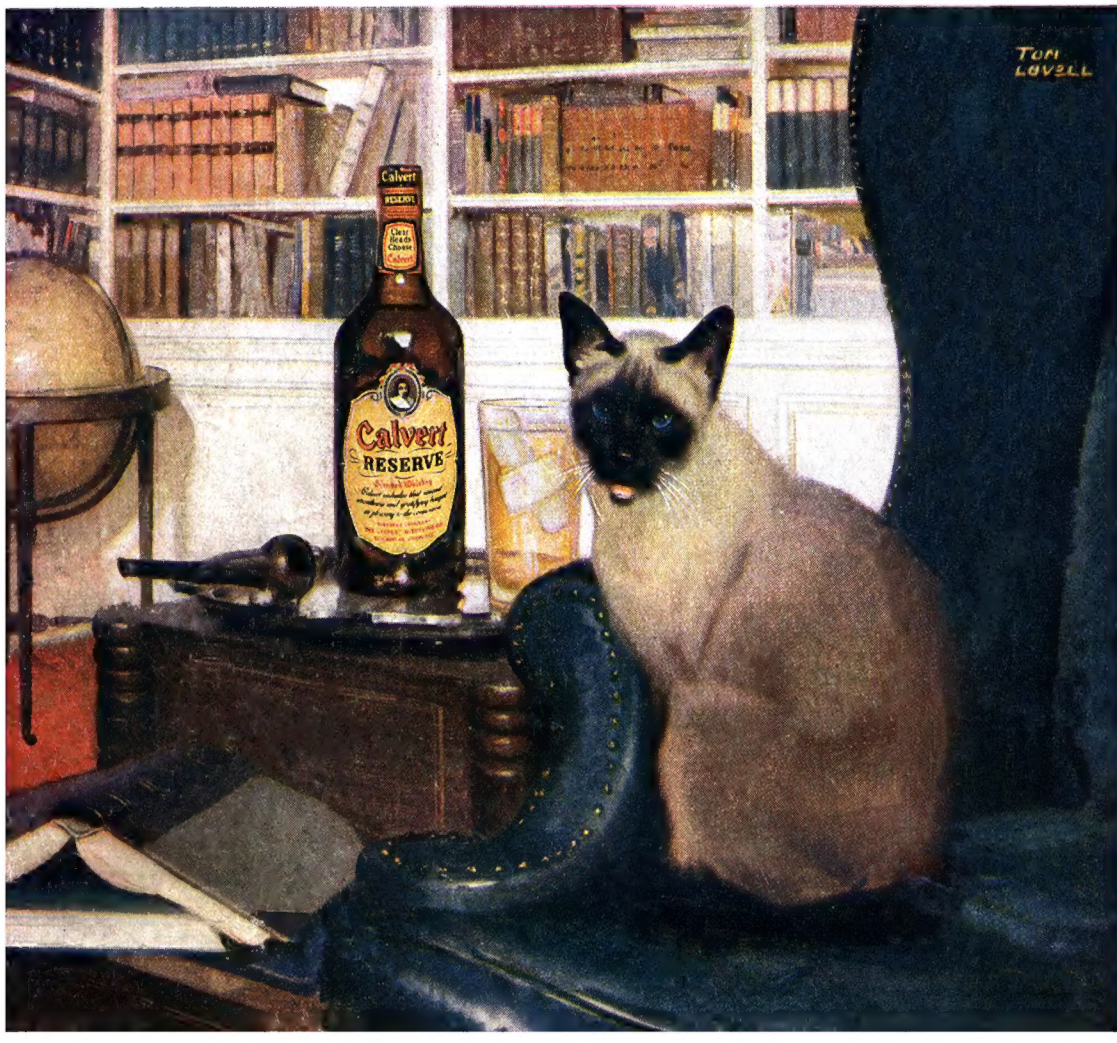
(My own shoe size is.....

Name.....

Address.....

Town.....State.....

MASON SHOE MANUFACTURING CO.
Dept. M-747 Chippewa Falls, Wis.



"Easy to see he's well educated!"

Why are wise folks switching to Calvert?
Because it's agreeably *light* whiskey...
blended for satisfying mellowness...superb taste...
all-around whiskey enjoyment. We invite you to try it
and learn for yourself the pleasant reasons why...

Clear Heads Choose Calvert

Calvert

BLENDED WHISKIES

Reserve OR *Special*

Calvert Distillers Corporation, New York City.
Calvert "Reserve": Blended Whiskey, 86.8 Proof, 65% Grain Neutral Spirits.
Calvert Distilled London Dry Gin, 90 Proof, Distilled from 100% Grain Neutral Spirits.